This book examines the politics and culture of landholding in eastern India. Professor John McLane explores the dual and sometimes conflicting roles of the zamindars, the landed chiefs, in eighteenth-century western Bengal during the decline of the Mughal empire and the rise of British hegemony. He focuses on zamindari rent extraction, techniques of coercion, and the meaning of gift-giving and gift-receiving. He shows how the zamindars kept alive the rituals, patronage, and other traditions of normative Hindu kingship for their subjects in the villages while they extracted revenue from the peasantry and intermediate gentry for the government of the Mughals and then the English East India Company. The author argues that the increased commercialization of the eighteenth century and efforts to maximize land revenues imposed severe strains on the paternalistic and gift-oriented culture of Bengal's huge landlords. Hence, by 1800, the major zamindar families had surrendered their estates to high caste zamindari and government employees who maintained the often hollow forms of Hindu kingship while seeking new ways to increase their rent collections from the peasant tenantry.

Professor McLane illustrates this analysis with a case study of Bengal's most important and controversial zamindari, the Burdwan raj, which owned a 5,000 square mile estate that figured prominently in parliamentary debates as well as in the fights between Warren Hastings and his enemies in Calcutta. The maharajas and maharanis of Burdwan saved the estate from dismemberment under harsh colonial tax policies through tenacity and creative legal innovations.

Cambridge South Asian Studies

Land and local kingship in eighteenth-century Bengal

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John R. McLane

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For Joan

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Preface and acknowledgments

That the major landed magnates occupied an enigmatic position in South Asian society became clear to me in a previous research project, on early Indian nationalism. Indian National Congress supporters, with some exceptions, showed a respect to the maharajas (great kings) of both British and princely India that seemed out of proportion to objective measures of their power and influence. The fact that the major landholders acted as partners of the colonial rulers and helped them extract taxes from the cultivating tenantry did not destroy their reputations with many fellow Indians. Long after the colonial government had spiked the maharajas' last dangerous cannon and dismissed their non-display soldiers, educated nationalists appointed titled landholders to head their cultural organizations and listed them first in newspaper accounts of public meetings. Even if some maharajas seemed to live out European fantasies of "oriental" pageantry and excess, they apparently fulfilled indigenous cultural expectations, especially in the rural population, about how society should operate, about the merit to be gained by honoring a superior being. Maharajas were almost as much a part of the normative, hierarchically arranged landscape as Brahmins.

One impulse to embark on the present study, therefore, was desire to understand the persistence of kingship's esteem in local imaginations, after the colonial government had appropriated ruling functions from the big landowners and left them with powers more ceremonial than substantive. A broader purpose was to search for clues about how agricultural land served simultaneously to uphold the ritual order and to support political authority. Yet another goal was to analyze what happened to the many tiers of intermediate authority between the villages and government of Bengal in the eighteenth century, as Bengal first gained *de facto* independence from the Mughal emperors at Delhi and then, after some decades, passed into the hands of the English East India Company. The position of the landholders did not change radically with the beginning of British rule. The maharajas kept their positions of local dominance before and after the British conquest by cooperating with regimes determined to use the maharajas' agency to maximize the revenue collections. Land revenue collections paid for the bulk of the East India

Company's trade investments. The large landholders were a vital cog in the colonial political economy.

Segments of Bengal's eighteenth-century economy, including the credit system that financed both trade and land revenue collections, were highly developed. The eighteenth century as a whole was a period of growing commercialization and monetization, and the start of East India Company rule brought no immediate general transformation of the political and economic systems. But in time, British laws and mores strengthened the individualistic, profit-seeking elements in rural society. By the end of the century, rights to collect rents and act out the role of the local *raja* were being delegated, sold, and mortgaged to smaller and smaller landholders. As a result, kingship became less benevolent and familiar and it fitted less well with Hindu expectations of how a good king should behave and sustain the ritually oriented community.

To better understand how Hindu traditions of kingship, Mughal institutions, and British colonial practices jointly shaped the behavior of the landholders, I decided to proceed at two distinct levels: the provincial and the local. Part I of this study examines the broad Hindu and Mughal bases, textual as well as institutional, of kingship in Bengal. Part I argues that Mughal policies of incorporating local rajas combined with Hindu norms to keep alive a local version of the Hindu raja. Yet this Hindu raja was often in jeopardy, balancing two sets of ultimately incompatible expectations and facing culturally in two directions, below and above. The raja won legitimacy in the eyes of his subject population as if guided by a Hindu template, by upholding social and ritual order through the punishment of improper behavior, the patronage of priests, rites, and temples, and the gifts to persons of exceptional geneological status or moral worth. But in order to obtain or keep his rajaship, he simultaneously was obligated to accept from the Mughal and then the British colonial state the sometimes rewarding, usually vexatious role of drawing taxes and tribute from his tenantry. A cost of governing everywhere, of course, is coercion. Yet in eighteenth-century west Bengal, the state was controlled by people alien to the region and its largely Hindu culture and by people intent on the maximization of revenue. Impatient with the indulgent practices of local kingship, the alien rulers acted to curtail the raja's use of gifts, patronage, and exemptions from taxation and brought the state into repeated conflict with local ruling families. The state was tending to monopolize the functions of rulership that in a more feudal age it had not claimed exclusively for itself.

Part II is a chronological case study that illustrates many of the principles and historical trends discussed in Part I. The case is the Burdwan raj, the wealthiest estate in late Mughal and British Bengal. In the mid-eighteenth century, Burdwan reached from the outskirts of Calcutta northwest across rich, flat rice fields to the sparsely settled hills towards the border of Bihar. Despite its deltaic flatness, the area exhibits extraordinary and varied beauty in its quilted pattern of paddy and

sugar plots, its clumps of bamboo and palm trees that shade thatched-roofed villages, its terracotta temples that house images and elaborate devotional activities, and numerous ponds, canals, and rivers that offer relief from the sultry heat. The Burdwan estate was selected because it was sufficiently important and long-lived to have attracted the continuous attention of Bengal's rulers, and therefore it stimulated the production of historical records of depth. Yielding over a tenth of Bengal's land revenue and encompassing vital weaving centers, Burdwan appeared in East India Company records both when it failed to meet the stiff revenue demands and when the Burdwan raj family experienced severe division or scandal. In other words, it was chosen not simply because its evolution mirrors trends elsewhere in western Bengal; it also was the most valuable estate and district in eastern India.

Many individuals and institutions helped me during the years I worked on this project. Barun De gave me sage advice when I was seeking a new project and he first took me to the Burdwan raj palaces that now are part of Burdwan University. Tarun Mitra, friend and polymath, taught me a lot about Bengal, intellectually and experientially. He enriched my understanding of both folk and literary wisdom. Phil Calkins was another stimulating companion and fellow student of the eighteenth century.

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Niranjan Sen Gupta guided me to knowledgeable people and important villages and temples within and outside the former Burdwan zamindari. He also helped with translations of Bengali materials.

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John R. McLane

Abbreviations

Ag.	Acting
App.	Appendix
Asst.	Assistant
BDG	*Bengal District Gazetteers*
BLI	*Burdwan Letters Issued, 1788-1800 (West Bengal District Records, New Series,* ed. Ranajit Guha and A. Mitra [Calcutta, 1956])
BLR	*Burdwan Letters Received, 1788-1802 (West Bengal District Records, New Series,* ed. Asok Mitra [Calcutta, 1955])
BOR	Board of Revenue
BR	Bengal Revenue
C	Council
COD	Court of Directors
Col.	Collector
Com.	Commissioner or Committee
Consult.	Consultations
COR	Committee of Revenue
Crim.	Criminal
Div.	Division
Ft Wm-IHC	*Fort William-India House Correspondence*
GG	Governor General
GOB	Government of Bengal
Gov.	Governor
JP	Judicial Proceedings
Jud.	Judicial
Mag.	Magistrate
Misc.	Miscellaneous
Offg.	Officiating
PCOR	Provincial Council of Revenue
Prog.	Proceeding
Rev.	Revenue

Rs.	Rupees
SDA	Sadr Diwani Adalat
TR	Territorial Revenue
WBDG	*West Bengal District Gazetteers*

Select glossary

abwab	cess levied in addition to ordinary revenue or rent
adalat	court of justice
a'imma	literally, plural of *imam* or Islamic religious leader but extended in Mughal usage to cover revenue-free or low-revenue tenures, given to religious and other leaders.
aman	winter rice crop
amil	temporary revenue collector appointed by government
amin	temporary revenue collector or assessor
amla	officer or officers employed by higher authority
anna	one sixteenth of a rupee
asal jama	original revenue demand
aus	summer rice crop
bania	merchant
banian	Indian manager of a European's affairs
bazi zamin	lands exempted from state's revenue assessment
benami	in the name of someone other than the actual owner
bhakti	Hindu devotionalism
bhuiya	landed chief
bigha	area of land usually equal in Bengal to a third of an acre
boro rani	senior queen
brahmottar	rent-free land granted originally to Brahmins

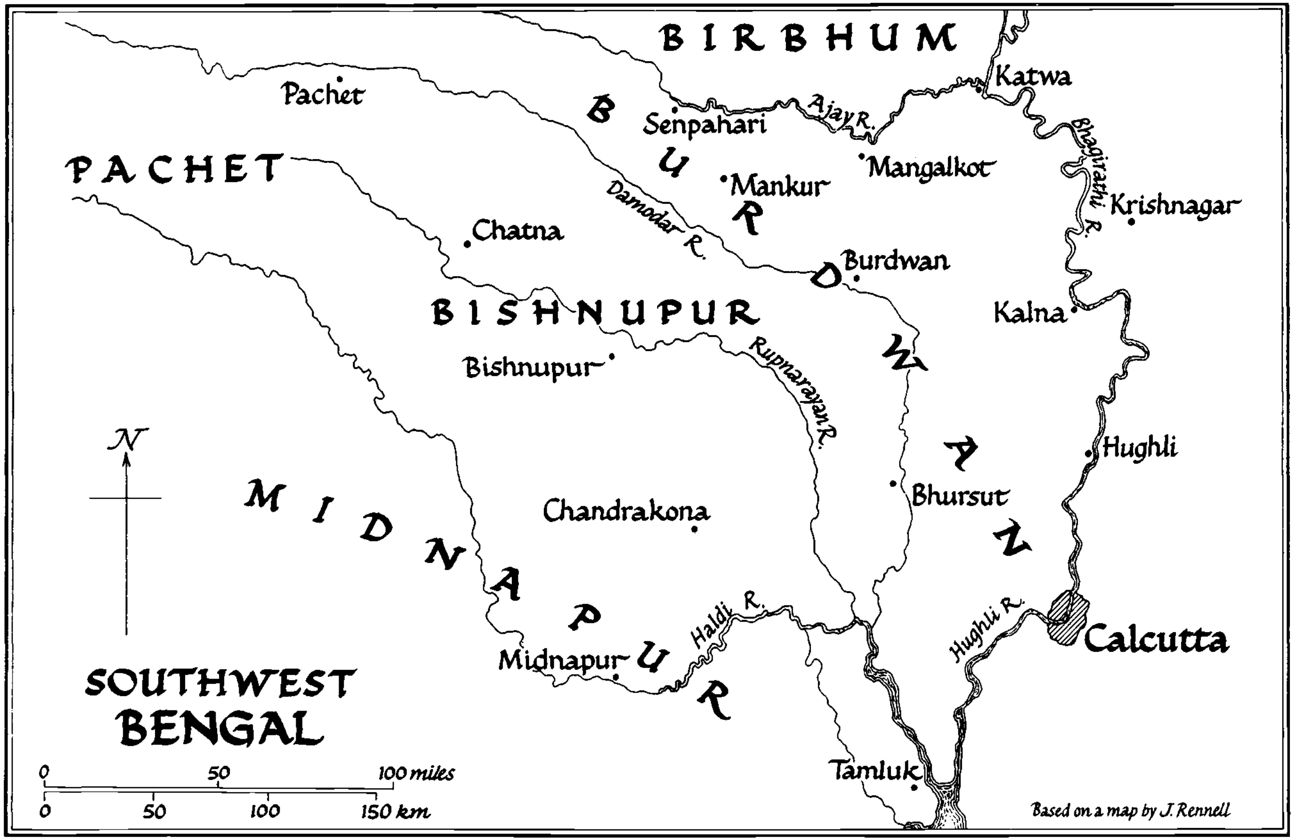
chakaran	maintenance lands for public or village servants
chakla	large subdivision of a province
chaudhuri	revenue collection supervisor, usually a zamindar
chaukidar	village watchman
chauth	cess theoretically equal to one quarter
choto rani	junior queen
chuar	robber or tribal
daftar	office
dakait	gang robber
dana	gift
danda	literally a stick; punishment, coercion
darbar	royal court or assembly
daroga	police officer
darpatni	permanent lease held under a patnidar
dastak	pass for duty-free trade
debottar	rent or revenue-free land for maintenance of deities and temples
Dewry Mahals	section of Burdwan zamindari for support of widowed ranis
dharma	code of conduct, obligation
dharma-shastras	code-books of Hindu behavior
diwan	minister, usually in charge of revenue
diwani	revenue ministry or department; jurisdiction of the Mughal diwan, as distinct from the Company's ceded territories
diwani adalat	civil court
faqir	ascetic
farman	imperial order
fatwa	judicial decree
faujdar	military officer in charge of a district
faujdari adalat	police court
gadi	throne
Gajan	festival honoring Shiva
ghatwal	guard, typically of a frontier area
gomashta	village agent of a superior landholder

gosain	ascetic
gotra	subdivision of jati sharing same name
gram	village
grihastha	non-cultivating, "respectable" person
guru	preceptor
ijara	farmed revenue holding
ijaradar	revenue farmer
inam	gift, usually of revenue-free holding
jagir	assignment of revenue in lieu of salary
jagirdar	holder of revenue assignment
jajmani	system of jati interdependence and exchanges
jama	land revenue demand
jati	caste or usually endogamous social grouping
jotdar	substantial tenant in village
kabuliyat	counter-agreement for a tenant's rent
kachari	office where rents are received
khal	water course
khalsa, khalisa	treasury department or office; lands paying revenue to the state, in contrast to jagir lands
khansaman	manager of household
khas	land from which revenue or rents are collected directly by government or zamindar, without intermediaries
khilat	robe given to honor a dependent
khudkasht	resident raiyat who cultivates in his residential village
kist	monthly installment
korta	master
kotwal	police officer
kror	1,00,00,000
Kshatriya	the second or warrior varna
kutkinadar	holder of under-farm beneath a zamindar

lakh	1,00,000
lakhiraj	revenue- or rent-free land
lathi	stave used for coercion or fighting
lathial	man employed to use lathi to coerce people
lingam	Shiva's phallic symbol
mahajan	money-lender
mahal	small revenue-paying area
mahant	chief temple priest
maharaja	great king
malguzari	land subject to revenue assessment
malzamin	security for payment of revenue
mandal	village headman
mangalkavya	poem eulogizing a deity
mangun	cess for superior's life-cycle ceremony
mansab	imperial rank
mansabdar	imperial officer
math	monastery
mathut	occasional cess
maulvi	Islamic religious scholar
mofussil	area away from capital or headquarters
mohussil	peon used in coercive collections of rents or revenue
moshaira	state stipend to a zamindar when dispossessed
mufti	person qualified to give opinions on Islamic law
mukhtar	legal agent
munsif	judge in subordinate court
muqaddam	village headman
mustajir	revenue farmer
mutasaddi	clerk, accountant
nabasakha	group of clean Shudra castes
naib	deputy
naqdi	household or, literally, ready-cash
nawab	ruler of province
nazim	ruler of province
nazr	ceremonial present, offering to a superior
nazrana	presents
nirikh	standard local rental rate
nizamat	government; criminal justice administration

nizamat adalat	criminal court
paik	irregular infantry, village militia or watchman
paikasht	a raiyat who cultivates land away from his residential village
pandit	learned Brahmin
pargana	group of villages forming a revenue unit
parwana	order or warrant
patni	permanent lease held under a zamindar
patnidar	holder of a permanent lease
patta	lease
patwari	village accountant
peshkar	manager for a superior officer
peshkash	tribute, present for an appointment
pir	Muslim saint
puja	worship ceremony
pulbandi	embankment
puniya	rent- or revenue-collection ceremony at start of year
purohit	Brahmin priest who serves a raja
qanungo	record keeper
qazi	Islamic judge
rairayan	major revenue officer
raiyat	cultivator, peasant
raj	kingdom, principality, large zamindari
raja	king, large zamindar
rajadharma	code of conduct for a raja
rajbari	zamindar's house or palace
rani	queen, female zamindar, wife or mother of a raja
rasad	progressive increase in revenue demand
sadr	chief
sadr diwani adalat	chief civil court
salami	present for a superior
samaj	society
sanad	official deed or decree

sannyasi	ascetic
sardar, sirdar	leader, chief
sarkar	large territorial division
sazawal	temporary collection officer
sepatni	permanent lease held under a darpatnidar
sepoy, sepahi	Indian soldier
shahzada	Mughal prince
shiqdar	intermediate rent or revenue collector
shraddha	funeral ceremonies
Shudra	fourth of four varnas
siropa	dress of honor given to a dependent
subah	province
subahdar	governor of province
taluq	unit of revenue territory
taluqdar	holder of revenue-collecting rights to a taluq
taqavi	state loans for agriculture
taraf	small territorial divison
tarafdar	revenue collector for a taraf
thakur	deity or honored person
thana	police jurisdiction or station
thanadar	police officer in charge of a thana
ulama	Islamic theologians; plural of alim
Vaishya	third of the four varnas
vakil	ambassador, agent, legal practitioner
varna	one of the four divisions into which "clean" *jatis* are grouped
zamin	land
zamindar	landholder, person paying land revenue directly to the state
zenanna	women's apartments


BIRBHUM
Katwa
Pachet
Ajay R.
Senpahari
PACHET
Mangalkot
Mankur
BURDWAN
Bhagirathi R.
Krishnagar
Damodar R.
Chatna
Burdwan
Kalna
BISHNUPUR
Rupnarayan R.
Bishnupur
N
Hughli
Bhursut
MIDNAPUR
Chandrakona
Haldi R.
Hughli R.
Calcutta
Midnapur
SOUTHWEST BENGAL
Tamluk
0 50 100 miles
0 50 100 150 km
Based on a map by J. Rennell

PART ONE

Bengal

1 Introduction

The eighteenth century in India began with the disintegration of one great empire and ended with the birth of another. The wars of succession, rebellions, invasions, and warlordism gave rise to "the Black Legend of the eighteenth century"[1] which emphasized economic decline and patterns of disorder during the dissolution of Mughal power. Pre-World War II historical analyses attributed the chaotic condition of the century to extractive absolutism or moral decay, with a surge of disloyalty, opportunism, and corruption. British accounts, seeking to justify European colonialism and demonstrate the inferiority of Indian culture and political forms, tended to portray Indian states as arbitrary and predatory, without the mitigating checks of private property, an hereditary, intermediate aristocracy between the Mughal elite and agrarian society, or even a coherent legal framework. They credited colonial rule with substituting administrative and commercial stability for what they described as pre-colonial despotism disintegrating into anarchy.

Historical revisionism

Since World War II, and especially in the 1980s, scholars have revised the older dominant view that the British conquest marked such a clear disjuncture in Indian development. Historians have noted the growing monetization and commercialization of the pre-colonial economy, made possible by the Mughal collection of money taxes, the importation from Europe of silver bullion that Indian rulers minted into rupees, and rising commodity production and trade, both internal and foreign. Instead of seeing British rule as reversing the trajectory of dominant trends, the new school sees the late Mughal economy having evolved communities of profit-oriented entrepreneurs and military adventurers, some of whose interests converged with European interests. Consequently, groups of Indians cooperated with European soldier-merchants in the fluid

[1] C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 35.

competitive politics of the eighteenth century. By 1760, the English East India Company and its Indian allies were the most cohesive and powerful military and commercial interest in India.[2]

The reassessment of the transition between Mughal and colonial rule was stimulated by the shift of scholarly attention from the highest levels of government and the fierce struggles in the imperial heartland around Delhi. The new focus has been the regions away from the capital, the secondary and tertiary levels of power, and the multitude of institutions and social groups essentially independent of the imperial state. As historians have reexamined the causes of the Mughal empire's rapid disintegration after 1700, they have directed their interest to the relatively stable and compact dynastic "successor states" and local chiefdoms which carried on the Mughal administrative system long after emperors had lost their decisive role. The result of these new analyses has been a revised understanding of both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It now seems that the Mughal state was never as absolute or centralized as once believed and that even at its apogee it depended heavily on non-military factors of support, especially on the cooperation of Hindu government employees, bankers, merchants, and landholders. The significant cooption and participation of intermediate, locally based groups in the Mughal empire, in its successor states, and in the transition to British rule is the bridge or common ground between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Historians now acknowledge more insistently that the collaboration of intermediate groups between states and agrarian society was necessary to incorporate local areas into either an India-wide empire or regional state systems and that both provided arenas for the fulfillment of personal ambitions among enterprising regional and local leaders. In fact, those ambitions first enabled the successor states to achieve their independence from Delhi and then were instrumental in British expansion and consolidation.

Bernard S. Cohn was one of the first people to reorient attention away from imperial politics to the relations between regional governments and "little kingdoms." He argued that although a group such as the Mughals might claim "absolute authority," in fact "power and authority most frequently are distributed among vertically or hierarchically ordered groups." The perpetual "conflict and competition" between these intermediate groups "paradoxically" led to an uneasy balance of political forces at the regional level.[3] Subsequent studies of

[2] See C.A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India*, II.1, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1988); also, Burton Stein, "Eighteenth Century India: Another View," *Studies in History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1989), pp. 1-26.

[3] Bernard S. Cohn, "Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: The Banaras Region," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 82, no. 3 (July–Sept. 1962), p. 313. See also Bernard S. Cohn, "Structural Change in Indian Rural Society, 1596–1885," in Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison, WI, 1969).

the eighteenth century have utilized variations on the same theme, maintaining that "the dignity and power of kingship" were widely shared through the political hierarchy so the Mughal emperor was "*Shah-an-Shah*, 'king of kings,'" rather than an "oriental despot" presiding over a centralized state.[4]

Muzaffar Alam,[5] Christopher Bayly,[6] Philip Calkins,[7] and André Wink,[8] among others, have emphasized the vitality of the intermediate structures of power in Awadh, Bengal, the Punjab, and the vast Maratha domains which covered most of the former Mughal territory. Together they have suggested that a redistribution rather than a decline of resources took place in the eighteenth century, with actual expansions of agricultural production, trade, and state revenue collections over broad areas. The principal beneficiaries from the decentralized but growing economy were the regional gentry – merchants, government "service" groups, and zamindars (the hereditary local rulers and collectors of the state's land revenues).

C.A. Bayly has been especially important in demonstrating the adaptive, dynamic role of the merchants and service gentry "between the revenue-based state and the mass of agrarian society" in the eighteenth century.[9] The commercial classes and service gentry were vital agents in the growth of trade and the money economy, in the emergence of relatively stable successor states, and in the commercialization of kingship, in which a market developed for "the perquisites of kingship and local lordship."[10] These intermediate groups provided credit, marketing, accounting, revenue collecting, and other crucial services to both the villages and the successor states and, eventually, to the European colonial state. In the process, they made themselves indispensable to the elites above them and the villagers below. They were "the oil of the Indian state system" in the period of political decentralization and redeployment that preceded and coincided with the rise of the colonial state.[11] Many members of the service gentry came to occupy a "dual role...as state servants and rentier landlords" or zamindars.[12]

André Wink, discussing the Maratha territories and building on Bayly's

[4] Bayly, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.1, p. 13.
[5] Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48* (Delhi, 1986).
[6] Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*.
[7] Philip B. Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700–1740," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Aug. 1970).
[8] André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Svarajya* (Cambridge, 1986).
[9] Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 6 and 187–89.
[10] Ibid., pp. 194–95 and 459-63.
[11] Ibid., p. 30.
[12] Ibid., p. 465.

rejection of "the Black Legend of the eighteenth century"[13] and his emphasis on the vitality of local networks of commercial, landholding, and service interests, has pushed furthest the argument for the continuity between the Mughal past and the eighteenth century. He suggested that the empire's "continued existence" had depended not on Mughal absolutism, centralism, military conquest, or the absence of "a counter-balancing territorial nobility" but instead on "the political incorporation of ever more aspiring gentry groups and nobility of indigenous or foreign extraction which rose to fortune and power."[14] In the eighteenth century, the "intermediary gentry or zamindar stratum," elevated by the Mughals and always "the prop of Muslim domination everywhere in the subcontinent," achieved new power as they asserted themselves and allied themselves with Mughal nobles competing for the remnants of the empire. Once the alliances established regional states, they consolidated their sovereignty through official appointments and revenue deductions and exemptions for the local gentry.[15] "A case can be made, then, that Muslim domination in India...in the end fell prey to its own success," with the "gentrification" of the Muslim empire. Not only was Maratha sovereignty established "within the political and socio-economic context of Mughal expansion itself," it employed the forms, nomenclature, and "structures of dominance established by the Mughals."[16]

Mughal Bengal

Bayly's and Wink's formulations apply, with slight modification, to pre-colonial Bengal. Commercialization in Bengal had probably proceeded further than in any other part of the Mughal empire and had lifted new, mostly Hindu, elites to prominence. Although agriculture was still largely subsistence, a thriving market and the requirement that rents and state revenues be paid in cash drew villagers into money relationships. The richer peasants and artisans produced rice, sugar, tobacco, indigo, cotton goods, and silk for market. Perhaps a million weavers wove textiles at mid-century for local consumption, the gigantic inland trade, and foreign export. Money-lending and banking were highly developed and linked villages to both trading and tax-collecting networks. The wealth of the Jagat Seth banking family, financiers to the *nazims* (governors) of Bengal, was so great that the family played a major role in determining who would rule. Revenue farming was common at both the zamindari and sub-zamindari levels

[13] Wink, *Land and Sovereignty*, p. 4.
[14] Ibid., pp. 26-27, 34, and 379.
[15] Ibid., pp. 8 and 31.
[16] Ibid., pp. 7–8.

although peasant holdings were not generally alienable.[17] Long before British rule began, then, "objective monetary values" were used "to express social relationships" across broad segments of the elites in Bengal.[18] It was the presence of various kinds of competing Indian entrepreneurs – commercial, military, and political – that made possible the East India Company's entry to the subcontinent's interior.

As Delhi's hold on Bengal loosened in the early decades of the eighteenth century, Mughal patterns of government remained in place. The continuities with the seventeenth century were especially strong because Bengalis, unlike the Marathas and the Sikhs to the west, did not displace the Mughals at the highest levels of provincial government. No indigenous military challenge to the Mughals developed in Bengal in the early eighteenth century. Moreover, unlike the Maratha zamindars of the Deccan,[19] Bengali zamindars had not risen out of the cultivating classes and did not possess kinship ties with and similar life styles to the peasantry.

Murshid Quli Khan, appointed as *diwan* (revenue minister) in November 1700 by Aurangzib, carried on the Mughal system while the empire broke apart. A series of non-Bengali Muslim governors succeeded Murshid Quli after his death in 1727. Nevertheless, Murshid Quli and his successors encouraged the gentrification of Bengal by relying heavily on the indigenous zamindars and diminishing the role of non-Bengali bureaucrats and military officers. Murshid Quli Khan permitted a few zamindars in western Bengal to absorb smaller zamindaris. These zamindars became the prop of British colonial government also. After the English East India Company established its rule in the 1750s and 1760s, it preserved these large zamindars and collected the land revenue through them, while progressively limiting their autonomy and privileges. Throughout the century, competition at the intermediate levels of society for the favors of the rulers was so prevalent that it precluded efforts to replace foreign governors with indigenous authorities. Western Bengal in the eighteenth century, then, was a land of small-scale artisan production and peasant cultivation[20] dominated by large landholders whose authority expanded in the early decades and shrank in the last decades.

[17] P.J. Marshall, *The New Cambridge History of India*, II. 2, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead Eastern India* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 10ff; Dharma Kumar and Meghnad Desai (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II: *c. 1757–c.1970* (Cambridge 1983), pp. 6ff and 151.

[18] Bayly, *New Cambridge History of India*, II. 2, p. 11.

[19] Wink, *Land and Sovereignty*, p. 35.

[20] Bayly has warned against exaggerating the size of the agricultural majority, pointing to the "massive local expenditure by the elites on warfare and display" and to the large numbers of "village servants, ritual specialists, artisans," soldiers, carters, itinerants, etc. He suggests that "at least four out of ten people in the total population could be viewed as non-agriculturalists." *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 51–52.

The zamindari system

The politics of land and the large landholders of western Bengal are the subject of this study. Politics are central to an understanding of eighteenth-century rural behaviors and values because political-administrative decisions, far more often than market forces, determined how control of land was distributed. Zamindaris, the largest individually held land units, were theoretically saleable but before 1790 they were rarely sold except on temporary leases. Village holdings were not ordinarily marketable. Although a powerful market for credit and commercial goods operated in rural Bengal, in the distribution of land and its rents and revenues, the market was subservient to the state before the Decennial Settlement of 1790. The zamindari was "a polity" and, unlike a contemporary British estate, not "a unit of production."[21] Zamindars and their officers almost never took an interest in how or what crops, except indigo, were grown. Their economic interests were confined to the sharing of the profits of cultivation, to the distribution of rights to their collection, and to encouragement of the cultivation of vacant land.

The zamindari system was the administrative-social formation through which the superior landholders extracted agricultural revenues for the Mughal and English East India Company states in eighteenth-century Bengal. Muslim administrators around 1400 coined the term zamindar from Persian components (*zamin* = land and *dar* = holder) and the Mughals used it to refer to the hereditary chiefs and landholders who paid tribute or the assessed revenue to the emperor. In nineteenth-century British usage, the term zamindar denoted a proprietary landlord although at times it also referred to the dominant peasants ("village zamindars") who engaged with a superior landlord for a village's rent.[22] In this study, it will be used in the restricted sense of the landholder who had a *sanad* (patent) from the state to collect the state's share of the land revenue. The zamindars under examination therefore had a dual role. Simultaneously, they were hereditary rulers or rajas of a territory in which they generally enjoyed broad autonomy and they were servants of the state, pledged to keep order and promote the welfare of their subjects, and removable if they failed to pay the revenue demanded by the state.[23]

Zamindars certainly "owned" a right to a share of the revenue as money passed through their hands on the way to the provincial treasury in the sense

[21] Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c. 1760–1850* (New Delhi, 1979), p. 21.

[22] Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1556–1707)* (Bombay, 1963), pp. 136–37, and W.H. Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India: A Historical Essay with Appendices* (2nd edn., Delhi, 1968), p. 18.

[23] John Shore, Minute of 2 April 1788, Walter Kelly Firminger (ed.), *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company. Dated 28th July, 1812* (3 vols., Calcutta, 1917–18), vol. II, p. 746. Hereafter cited as *Fifth Report, 1812*.

that, with state permission, they could sell, mortgage, and inherit that share.[24] But they did not own the land itself in a meaningful sense before the end of our period.[25] Rather than owning a physical area of the earth's surface, they held rights over most of the inhabitants of the territory assigned to their management: rights to their deference, their labor, their crops, occasionally even their women. Landownership was therefore conceived of in more social and less physical terms than in contemporary western societies. Individual plots of land were in the possession of superior peasants who cultivated them or rented them to other peasants, usually without interference from the zamindar, and who usually were succeeded by their heirs on payment of a succession fee to the superior landholder. The rights of the superior peasantry fell short of absolute ownership because they could be dispossessed by the zamindar or his intermediaries and they rarely were known to sell permanently their rights of cultivation. Even a transfer between generations required in theory a superior's permission. Absolute individual ownership of land, with legally protected rights of inheritance, sale, and mortgage, was a British innovation.[26] As late as the 1780s, East India Company civil servants were still locked in debates among themselves about whether land in Bengal belonged to the state, the zamindars, or the peasants or whether ownership was shared. The debate was revived more than once in the nineteenth century. The indeterminate, corporate reciprocity in which many individuals had complementary rights to the same piece of ground and the absence of written codes defining rights of the layered interests to specific plots of land baffled British administrators who looked upon legally protected, absolute individual ownership as a natural right and a condition for economic progress.[27]

The absence of juridically defined rights of individual ownership fed the British assumption that the Indian political system was despotic.[28] In a characteristic comment, John Shore wrote: "the constitution of the Moghul empire, despotic in its principle, arbitrary and irregular in its practise, renders it sometimes almost impossible to discriminate between power and principle; fact

[24] Almost any generalization about landownership requires qualification. Many zamindars were dispossessed of their share of the revenue in the administrations of Murshid Quli Khan (1700–27) and Mir Qasim (1760-63).

[25] An exception was the *sir* or *ny-jot* lands or home farm of a zamindar which were cultivated by laborers or tenants directly under the zamindar's control.

[26] See John Shore, Minute of 2 April 1788; Ray, *Change*, chapters 2 and 4; and Walter C. Neale, "Land Is to Rule," in Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control*, pp. 3–15.

[27] Thus the term "landowner" is misleading for almost all eighteenth-century situations in Bengal. See Dharma Kumar, "A Note on the Term 'Land Control,'" in Peter Robb (ed.), *Rural India: Land, Power and Society under British Rule* (London, 1983), pp. 59ff.

[28] The ancestry of the theory of Asian despotism, widely accepted by the British in Bengal, is traced by Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974), pp. 462 ff.

and right; and if custom be appealed to, precedents in violation of it are produced."[29] Four or so decades later, Holt Mackenzie, one of the most knowledgeable students of Bengali and north Indian tenures, said he had spent his life studying the varied and complex forms of land tenures "without understanding them."[30] Nevertheless, from the beginning of British rule in the 1750s, Company officers proceeded as if there were "principles" that guided relations between zamindars and their dependents that study and time would reveal. At least until the 1790s, the Company acted with caution, apprehensive about introducing change that might stir resistance from vested interests and jeopardize revenue collections, and aware that, however "despotic," the local land systems were regulated by their own logic and moral restraints. The exemption from revenue and rent demands of substantial areas for the purpose of supporting religious specialists and menial servants engaged in revenue collection and peace-keeping tasks was clear evidence that tenurial forms served vital community purposes.[31] A major concern of this study is how the patrimonial, corporate values of local kingship clashed with individualistic, legalistic British culture. However, the tension between what the raja owed to subjects below and the state above was not new to the colonial era. Rather, there was inherent in Indian kingship a conflict between the norms of paternal indulgence and ritual obligation, on the one hand, and the necessity of fiscal extraction, on the other. The zamindars of Bengal experienced the tension with particular intensity and pathos as the Mughal and colonial states heightened their demands and as commercial forms penetrated the higher ranks of society.

The imperial institutions of the Mughal and Company states met the landed rural hierarchies in the pivotal role of the zamindar. The zamindars were subordinate but vital partners to the Mughal and Company states in governing the scattered villages in which most Bengalis lived. The later Mughal emperors appointed the larger zamindars as *mansabdars* (holders of *mansab* or imperial rank) to incorporate them into the hierarchically ranked governing body of the empire. In the literature of seventeenth-century Bengal, "even the small zamindars appear as Rajas, omnipotent within their territories, while the representatives of the imperial power seem to be a distant reality hardly intruding

[29] John Shore, Minute of 2 April 1788, p. 737.

[30] Quoted in B.H. Baden-Powell, *The Land-Systems of British India* (3 vols., Oxford 1892), vol. I, p. 1.

[31] See chapter 3. Frykenberg, in emphasizing how "a veritable jungle of overlapping terminologies" has hampered "understanding of the very nature of the entities and interacting processes relating to land in India," has reminded us that "whatever the terminology, attempts to classify and differentiate between myriad varieties of zamindars, jagirdars, and ryots ... become meaningful only if the observer recognizes that all kinds of holdings and rights were intricately linked to definite socio-ceremonial and communal as well as economic and political roles." Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control*, p. xv.

into the zamindar's sphere of influence."[32] Under both Mughal and Company rule, the provincial government of Bengal solicited from Delhi confirmation of the titles of raja and maharaja by which their subjects addressed them. Accepted as a sovereign by their subjects and accustomed after centuries of Muslim rule to paying tribute or revenue to alien rulers, zamindars were the agents by which imperial governments obtained village resources.

The cultural and structural distinction between the hereditary, local raja-zamindars and the temporary imperial mansabdars was a source of conflict in Mughal principle and practice. The zamindars of Bengal were not only more or less permanent, they were Bengali-speaking and far more committed to local than to provincial or imperial Mughal interests. In their rituals, distribution of patronage, and allocation of resources, the Hindu zamindars were guided by pre-Muslim custom, the *dharma-shastras,* and mythical accounts of Hindu kingship. Before the early 1700s, the non-zamindari mansabdars, on the other hand, were almost always Muslim, Persian-speaking, temporary, and dependent for their assignments upon powerful patrons in and imperial favor from distant Delhi. Bengal was not a favorite area of service and was sometimes used as a punitive assignment for officers who had performed unsatisfactorily elsewhere.

Mansabdars often distrusted zamindars. Mughal administrative manuals and orders indicated that zamindars were considered oppressive to the peasantry and politically untrustworthy.[33] The revenue regulations issued under Akbar and Aurangzib failed even to recognize zamindars as part of "the standard revenue machinery," despite the fact that zamindars were used in many areas to gather the revenue.[34] Manucci wrote about 1700 that "usually the viceroys and governors are in a constant state of quarrel with the Hindu princes and *zamindars* – with some because they wish to seize their lands; with others, to force them to pay more revenue than is customary."[35] When Mughal officers saw behavior they disapproved of, they said it was *zamindarin.* Thus, after the raja of Burdwan's diwan and his army deserted Nazim Alivardi during the Maratha invasion of 1742, Yusuf Ali wrote that he ran away "in the manner of a *zamindar.*"[36] The refractory and exploitive reputation of zamindars was reflected in the exasperation of a Mughal who, commenting in 1761 about pillaging raids of Maratha leaders in areas they conquered, said they "were not

[32] Tapan Kumar Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History* (Calcutta, 1953), pp. 22 and 31.

[33] Habib, *Agrarian System,* pp. 136ff.

[34] M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangazeb* (Bombay, 1968), pp. 84-85.

[35] Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India, 1653–1708,* tr. William Irvine (4 vols., London, 1906–08), vol. II, pp. 431–32.

[36] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang,* in Jadunath Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs* (Calcutta, 1952), p. 98.

behaving as rulers, but as zamindars."[37] Their frequent failures to deliver the full revenue demand punctually and their pragmatic hesitancy in times of political disturbance led Mughal officials and their British successors to equate zamindars with deviousness and inconstancy. However, in a land of difficult communications, scattered settlements, and entrenched local hierarchies, the small bodies of alien administrators in Bengal never found a satisfactory alternative to entrusting the zamindars with revenue collection and, until the 1790s, maintenance of order.

Low population density and an abundance of arable but uncultivated land contributed to the difference in outlooks between zamindars and the provincial government. With probably fewer than 25 million people both before the 1770 famine and in 1800, after recovering from the famine,[38] Bengal had only a small fraction of the current population of west Bengal. The estimates of how much land was waste although cultivable varied from one third to two-thirds of Bengal's 90,000 square miles but all agreed the area was vast.[39] A common zamindari objective was to attract settlers into the waste lands. A principal means of opening up lands to cultivation was to exempt them partially or fully, temporarily or permanently, from the payment of rent and revenue. Zamindars did this on a liberal scale by alienating land, sometimes explicitly as land-clearing grants, sometimes as religious endowments. In periods of weak vigilance by the Mughal and British governments, zamindars and their officers exempted vast areas of cultivated land from the payment of rent, as a form of beneficence to favored subjects. Like the Mughals before them, the Company's government, whose main object was maximization of the revenue, regarded the zamindars as perfidious because their land gifts were imperiling the state's revenue base.

To a certain extent, the zamindari and the state were different types of political systems and were in conflict over "principles of social organization and of ideology."[40] The local, hereditary zamindari system was what one scholar has described as "immanent" and was "characterized by customary, informal, even intuitive but always patrimonial relations."[41] Another described it as "a form of lordship, but localistic, relativistic, or collegial, and redistribu-

[37] M. Athar Ali, "The Passing of Empire: The Mughal Case," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (July 1975), p. 392.

[38] H.T. Colebrooke in 1803 estimated the population of Bengal and Bihar to be "at least" 24 million, using local, sample surveys of population, land use, and salt consumption. Henry Thomas Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1884 reprint of 1804 edn.) pp. 9–20.

[39] *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. I, p. 25.

[40] Burton Stein, "State Formation and Economy Reconsidered," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (July 1985), p. 408.

[41] Richard B. Barnett, *North India between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals, and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley, CA, 1980), p. 9.

tionist."[42] The foreign Mughal and British states, by contrast, were "transcendent" and were "based on relatively abstract, codified, objective rules, and on the relative uniformity and centralization which allows them to demand a monopoly on legitimate authority."[43] Or again, the Mughal (and British) state was "universalistic, absolutistic, fiscally- and extractively-oriented."[44] By the early nineteenth century, the differences had narrowed and the zamindari system had become more bureaucratic, profit-oriented, impersonal, and less expressive of fundamental Hindu culture.

Despite the distinctions of ethnicity, purpose, and permanency of tenure, the zamindar and the nazim (provincial Mughal governor) at Murshidabad had much in common. Most obviously, both performed extractive as well as redistributive functions. When either indulged a dependent with a grant of revenue-free land, he needed to find expanded resources or exact the foregone income from other people. Although the population probably grew through most of the eighteenth century until the famine of 1770, although Bengal contained unused but arable land, and although the revenue system did not operate hydraulically, one man's benefice often led to increased extraction for others. For both zamindars and nazims, extraction and redistribution were interrelated. Moreover, neither zamindars nor nazims were notably unavailable to their subjects. Murshidabad was not Delhi and its court was far less formal and grand than the emperor's. In the eighteenth century the nazims copied the zamindari practice of bringing together major revenue payers in a ceremony (*puniya*) that marked the end of one revenue year and the beginning of the next. The zamindars distributed *khilats* (robes of honor) to their subordinates, in imitation of the Mughal practice. The political authority of both zamindars and nazims was of a patrimonial sort, based on personal, face-to-face relations with broad discretion vested in the office-holder's person. The exercise of authority in turn was eased by the apolitical character of the population outside the narrow group of political elites who made decisions at the courts of the zamindars and nazims. We will look first at patrimonial authority, at the way in which familial forms of patriarchy suffused the relations between a major zamindar or nazim and his subordinate bureaucrats and revenue payers.

Zamindari power was centered in two buildings, both in the raja's chief place of residence: the revenue *kachari* (office) and the court. The revenue kachari was an office building in which rents were received roughly ten times a year, records of great complexity were kept by clerks, disputes over revenue obligations and rights were settled by the diwan (revenue minister), and subordinate

42 Stein, "State Formation," p. 408.
43 Barnett, *North India*, p. 9.
44 Stein "State Formation," p. 408.

landholders or collection officers in arrears were punished by detention or bodily coercion. The zamindari diwan was ordinarily not kin to the raja and his kachari was a bureaucratic place, often associated with exaction and pain. There were also small subordinate kacharis, thatched clay or mat structures, located in outlying villages where peasants paid their revenue to intermediate landholders and where peasants in arrears were frequently detained or beaten.

By contrast, the zamindari court (*rajbari*) was where the raja presided and presented a less extractive and more beneficient, fatherly face to his subjects.[45] It was architecturally grand by Bengali standards and in the British period was often built in neo-classical European style, with columned facades. The raja's relatives, ministers, and subordinate landholders congregated here to honor their superior, ask and receive favors, and be entertained and honored in return. In court, the raja consulted his advisers, heard disputes and distributed justice with the help of *pandits*, conferred rent-free land on learned men and priests, gave honorary turbans and robes from his wardrobe to his subordinate officers and landholders, and entertained with poets, singers, musicians, and jesters. On the occasion of weddings and funerals and major *pujas* (ceremonies of worship), he gave communal feasts. In many zamindaris, even the *mandals* (village headmen) came to court and no doubt went away gratified to know their standing had been recognized and were impressed by the magnificence of the surroundings, the sophistication and refinement of the courtiers, and the power of the weapons and large stature of the often non-Bengali uniformed guards in attendance. The respect the mandals had for their raja depended more than anything else on his revenue-collecting arrangements, which were balanced between privileged rates for local elites such as the mandals and the danger of over-assessment and perceptions of excessive inequality among others. The mandals and other elites also must have judged their raja by the ability of his militia and judicial decision-making to afford them protection and on the ritual services he arranged to have performed.

As leader of his territory's *samaj* (society), the raja provided maintenance for Brahmins in the form of revenue-free land grants. In a large zamindari, invariably administered in decentralized fashion, this was the key to the raja's socio-ritual hegemony. He issued sanads (written authority) to Brahmins permitting them to perform marriages. And when a man had been excommunicated from his *jati* (caste) for violating its rules of behavior, a zamindari sanad was sometimes required for readmission.[46] The raja built and endowed some of the

[45] There were female zamindars in the eighteenth century but they were rare enough that masculine terminology will usually be employed in general discussions for the sake of stylistic simplicity.

[46] This was true of the Burdwan zamindar in 1774 even though the management of the land revenues had been transferred from the raja to temporary revenue farmers. PCOR Prog. of Burdwan of 30 May 1774, vol. 1.

temples in his territory and provided for the performance of certain pujas which Hindus believed affected their welfare. He built roads and dug ornamental tanks in the vicinity of his major residences; he usually was responsible for the repair of flood-control embankments; and he encouraged the clearing of waste and jungle land with low-rent or rent-free tenancies. In general, though, zamindars' redistributive spending away from their residences rarely included public works other than temple construction, river bank repairs, and, occasionally, a road. Their hold on their subjects' loyalty rested more on their patronage, their distribution of revenue obligations, and the way their ritual and ceremonial functions matched the expectations their subjects had of Hindu kingship.[47] Judging from Mukundaram's *Candi-mangala* (1589), Edward Dimock and Ronald Inden have written:

> the ideal unit in Bengali society...is not the Bengal region as a whole; nor is it Bengal as represented in a simple rural village or its regional capital. The ideal unit of Bengali society is considered to be the local chiefdom with its capital; and the highest social ideal that a man can attain is to become the raja and master of his own local chiefdom and to live at the pinnacle of the complex urban life which goes on in the chiefdom's capital town.[48]

The nature of political authority

The nazim's court at Murshidabad shared some of the patrimonial character found in the zamindar's rajbari. The Mughal buildings in Bengal were unimposing[49] compared to those in Delhi or even in other provincial capitals such as Hyderabad, Lahore, and Lucknow, as if to conform to the preference for scaled-down pomp among high-status Bengalis,[50] who, for example, traveled with a smaller retinue than their up-country counterparts.[51] The nazims distributed robes of honor from their personal wardrobes to mansabdars and zamindars, graded in costliness to distinguish the ranks of the recipients. They furnished them with horses from their stables. They fed Muslim mansabdars, *shaikhs* (chiefs, elders), and *ulama* at their own table, varying the number and quality of the dishes with the guest's rank. Nazims also made themselves

[47] The fullest cultural analysis of Bengali zamindaris between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries is Ronald B. Inden, "The Hindu Chiefdom in Middle Bengali Literature," in Edward C. Dimock, (ed.), *Bengal Literature and History* (East Lansing, 1967), pp. 21–46.

[48] Edward C. Dimock and Ronald B. Inden, "The City in Pre-British Bengal, According to the *mangala-kavyas*," in Richard L. Park (ed.), *Urban Bengal* (East Lansing, MI, 1969), p. 14.

[49] Philip B. Calkins, "The Role of Murshidabad as a Regional and Subregional Center in Bengal," in Park (ed.), *Urban Bengal*, pp. 25–26.

[50] Calkins, ibid., suggested the reason was that Mughal officials assigned to Bengal did not expect to remain there long.

[51] Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809–10* (Patna, 1928), pp. 155–56.

available in public audience on a regular basis to renew personal contact with their employees and other subjects and listen to complaints against their subordinate officers and zamindars.[52] They personally led their troops on military expeditions and in times of peace toured the countryside on hunting trips, reducing the distance between themselves and their subjects.[53] All of this was characteristic of "the mixing of household and state" found in "the patrimonial-bureaucratic" form of Mughal government.[54]

Deference to the authority of one's personal superior was so strong in the eighteenth century that there seemed to be a predisposition to ascribe charismatic, transcendent qualities to the highest, hereditary office-holders. Coming into the presence of a nazim or a powerful raja was akin to obtaining *darshan*, the "auspicious sight" received from viewing a sacred image or famous *bhakta* (devotee).[55] In Islamic terms, the experience was similar to *baraka*, the blessing or sense that "the divine reaches into the world" when in the presence of a person of exceptional character and force or genealogical background.[56] Mughal notions of the divinity of the emperor reinforced this tendency. Akbar's minister, Abul Fazl, had described Mughal royalty as

> a light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe, the argument of the book of perfection, the receptacle of all virtues ... It is communicated by God to kings without the intermediate assistance of anyone, and men, in the presence of it, bend the forehead of praise towards the ground of submission.[57]

Hindu rajas and Muslim nazims encouraged this tendency to see divinity in kingship by associating themselves with royal and sacred symbols, through their *darshans*, celebration of rites, personal devotions and religious study, and patronage of holy persons from whom *darshan* and *baraka* were more conventionally available.

The inclination to perceive superior qualities in the nazim or one's own raja was not limited to relations with people in positions of highest authority. It could be found in many of the small groups to which Bengalis belonged: the family, the sect led by a *gosain* or *pir*, or the local *taluqdar* (one of a zamindar's subordinate landholders). Virtually everyone was a member of a group or

52 Seid Gholam Hossein Khan, *Sein Mutaqherin; or View of Modern Times, Being an History of India from the Year 1118 to the Year 1194, of the Hedjrah* (3 vols., Calcutta, n.d.), vol. II, p. 432, and vol. III, p. 170.

53 Ghulam Hussain Salim, *Riyazu-s-Salatin (A History of Bengal)*, tr. Abdus Salam (Delhi, 1975, reprint of 1903 edn.), p. 280.

54 Stephen P. Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Nov. 1979), p. 83.

55 See Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, PA, 1981), p. 3.

56 See Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago, IL, 1971), pp. 44–45.

57 [Abu'l-Fazl Allami], *The Ain-i Akbari*, tr. H. Blochmann, rev. D.C. Phillott, vol. I (2nd edn., Calcutta, 1939), p. 3.

groups with a leader to whom personal loyalty was owed and who would represent or connect his followers to a broader mundane or supernatural sphere. "Each group had a head of some sort – a *seth* (merchant head), a *pir* (Muslim saint), a *zamindar*, a street chief, a village headman or council,"[58] or a father or grandfather. The group leader linked each hierarchical social unit to the one above it, like many small pyramids stacked on top of one another, forming a gigantic pyramid.

British observers commented on both the intensity of the personal, face-to-face bonds and the attenuation of loyalties over geographic and social distance. They saw the failure of political allegiance to carry upwards from one pyramid to the next, because of the isolation and self-containment of social units, as a source of political weakness peculiar to India or at least different from European society. Robert Orme, writing in the mid-eighteenth century, said "a real attachment to their prince" was "rarely found to influence the people of Indostan."[59] Henry Strachey, who served in western Bengal at the turn of the century, wrote that "in fidelity and attachment to a master or a chief," the lower classes "are not surpassed by any people." On the other hand, they "have no idea of loyalty, or disloyalty, except to their masters who support them ... No government ever stood more independent of public opinion. I never knew one native, who had even a remote idea of the political state of the country."[60] Sir John Malcolm made the same point: "neither individuals nor the community can recognize, much less feel an attachment to what we call the state, as separated from the persons who, for the time being, preside over the different branches of its administration. The sovereign has his servants and adherents;...but the latter owe no fidelity or allegiance, except to their immediate superiors."[61] A political system without a strong and visible leader, without an absolute ruler, was not comprehensible or legitimate. When the historian Sayyid Ghulam Husain Khan tried to explain why "constant failure" plagued "every endeavour" of the British in the early years of their rule, he concluded that their political practices clashed with Indian "customs and usages." Company employees were repeatedly transferred, they governed by committee, committee members were "perpetually at variance" with each other, there was no "head over them all, with full power and authority." "This country seems to have no master at all," he concluded.[62]

58 M.N. Pearson, "Shivaji and the Decline of the Mughal Empire," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Feb. 1976), p. 223.

59 Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire, of the Morattoes, and of the English Concerns in Indoostan; from the Year MDCLIX* (London, 1805), p. 419.

60 H. Strachey, Midnapur Judge and Mag., to Jud. Dept., 30 Jan. 1802, *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. II p. 607.

61 John Malcolm, *The Life of Robert, Lord Clive* (3 vols. London, 1836), vol. I, p. 223.

62 Khan, *Seir*, vol. III, pp. 184–86.

Beginning in the family, the individual Bengali child was taught the principles of hierarchical authority which were transferable beyond the family and which led people to rely on the head of their social unit to mediate for them in a larger realm. A Christian missionary wrote that affluent families near the Hughli river "employ persons to teach their children, even of five years of age, how to behave on the approach of a bramhun, a parent, a spiritual guide, &c, how to sit, to bow, and appear to advantage in society." A boy learned to call his father *thakur* (lord) and his mother *thakurani*. "When he returns from a journey, he bows to his father and mother, and, taking the dust from their feet, rubs it on his head."[63] Marvin Davis has written that in a modern Bengali village, in Midnapur district, the male head of the family is "referred to as *malik*, chief, or *korta*, doer,...and in principle exercises mastery and authority (*adhikara*) over all affairs of the family; internally with regard to the interaction between family members, and externally as spokesman for the family in all public affairs." He is also "responsible for maintaining the behavioral code," or *dharma*. The family head's duties were thus homologous with that of the zamindar-raja's who was expected to uphold dharma "within his realm." Conversely, the raja "is often described as the parent (*ma-bap;* literally, mother and father) of his people, while all persons within his kingdom are termed his offspring (*praja*)," the term used to describe a married couple's children. Both the father and the king "exercise *adhikara*. And both are said, in the local idiom, to lord it over (*prabhuputra kora*) others."[64]

Another sign that hierarchy was inculcated in the family was that "hierarchical love" was more valued than "egalitarian love." The egalitarian conjugal love between husband and wife, for example, was seen as potentially "divisive" because it separated the married couple from the husband's parents. "The love that unites the family, as the set of par excellence sharing relatives, is the hard hierarchical love of the senior for the junior. This is the only form of love that can go on incorporating persons indefinitely without excluding any." Egalitarian love was also valued but it had to be subordinated to hierarchical love, in which the *korta* (master) nourished the members of his family "by commanding, instructing, and punishing them" and in which family members were expected to "show respect for" their korta "by obeying and serving him."[65]

If those charismatic qualities which people seemed to see in leaders of long-standing had been routinely transferred to their successors and deputies,

[63] W. Ward, *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos* (2nd edn., 2 vols., Serampore, 1818), vol. I, p. 118.

[64] Marvin Davis, *Rank and Rivalry: The Politics of Inequality in Rural West Bengal* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 114–15.

[65] Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago, IL, 1977), pp. 25–30 and 87.

Bengal's political life would have been more stable and harmonious than it was. But successions among the families of both the nazims and the zamindars frequently produced crises. Disputes or usurpations followed the deaths of nazims Murshid Quli Khan (1727), Sarfaraz Khan (1740), Alivardi Khan (1756), and Siraj-ud-daula (1757). Hardly a zamindari family in west Bengal escaped major family dissension surrounding successions, with military skirmishes, court battles, and formation of rival factions among the zamindari servants, some of whom took advantage of the feuding to plunder the estate. Rajas Chaitanya and Damodar Singh, first cousins, sent both their militia and lawyers against each other in their struggle over the Bishnupur zamindari. Raja Tejchandra fought for many years with his mother, Rani Bishnukumari, for control of the Burdwan zamindari. Rani Saraswati of Dinajpur was so displeased by the management of her nine-year-old adopted son's zamindari by his relative and guardian that she kidnapped her son.[66] When a Mughal general was wounded or killed in battle, or even dismounted from his elephant, his officers and their men sometimes stopped fighting and fled.[67] Perhaps a source of the difficulty in transferring allegiance was that the great concentration of authority in an exalted figure, and the emotional attachment it engendered, inhibited a quick or automatic submission to the new holder of the same office, as if the transfer implied disloyalty to the deceased master. The problem of succession disputes may have been even more severe in the smaller zamindaris where the Mughal and Company states less often enforced rules of primo-geniture. Whatever the cause, the effect was that political attachments at the time of succession seemed to have a shale-like quality. And the power struggles that broke out when a nazim, zamindar, or general died may have contributed to the sense that politics were a nasty, self-serving, incomprehensible, and dangerous affair that should be left to those few families who had a claim on the office. The fact that the rulers were foreigners who spoke, dressed, ate, and worshiped in alien manners would have made this especially likely for the politics of Murhidabad or Calcutta.

So the expectation that political authority would be hierarchically distributed among hereditary and often ethnically distinct leaders was one factor that led most Bengalis to take little interest in administrative or political matters outside their villages. The scattered location of small villages, connected by rivers and paths which became difficult to traverse in the rainy season, and the absence of significant cities other than Murshidabad, Dacca, and Calcutta reinforced the sense of isolation and indifference to regional politics. Rural Bengalis lived in

[66] See chapter 12 below.

[67] Orme, *Historical Fragments*, p. 419, makes the general point. Mughal warfare in Bengal provides examples.

very small communities. By one late eighteenth century estimate, the average Bengali village contained roughly 160 people or perhaps 32 families.[68] Dependence, being personal and owed to particular persons, tended to extend only as far as physical communication and face-to-face contact permitted. In such a decentralized society, overwhelmingly occupied by the seasonal tasks of agriculture, the raja's or nazim's court would seem remote, even irrelevant, to most non-elite Bengalis.

One indication of how apolitical and segmented the population was is the absence of any corporate body of zamindars. Before they began to build houses in Calcutta in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, zamindars seem rarely to have met or communicated in any manner except when summoned to the capital to enter into the annual revenue engagements. Another indication was the infrequency of rebellions and the localness of protests against the abuse of political authority. Not only were regimes of foreign origin able to govern Bengal continuously for over six centuries with few major indigenous challenges,[69] they did so for extended periods with minimal use of military power except to protect the province from external invasion and reduce the frontier rajas. Even when *nizamat* and British taxes and oppression reached unprecedented heights in the 1750s and 1760s, changes of leadership were arranged through conspiracies between the British and disaffected mansabdars and Hindu bankers, without popular participation. Company officials in the 1760s and 1770s maintained the pressure for increased collections, coerced spinners and weavers to produce for the Company, extorted presents, and used their new political power to monopolize trade, without provoking significant collective violence. And when the working of unforgiving revenue regulations at the end of the century caused almost all the major zamindars to forfeit the bulk of their land, the protests were largely confined to petitions and sullen non-cooperation. In most interior districts, zamindari dependents did not rise up; Company militia rarely had to be deployed. Supra-village politics was an elite affair even though the massive flow of revenue from the villages to the Mughal and British governments brought minimal return in the form of irrigation, flood control, famine relief, road building, or judicial administration.

Another factor which has been said to have inclined villagers to disassociate their own concerns from the politics of the rajbari and the nizamat was the view that each jati (caste) had specific duties and complementary occupations. The high level of occupational mobility in Bengal, where individuals among the

[68] Colebrooke estimated that the population of Bengal and Bihar was perhaps 24 million, living in cities, towns, and 135,000 villages. Therefore, if 90 percent lived in villages, then the average village would have contained 160 persons. *Remarks*, p. 10.

[69] It might be argued that the more than three decades of Bengali and Afghan resistance to the Mughal conquest and pacification efforts is an exception to this generalization.

non-literate jatis moved often between agriculture, artisan production, and other forms of manual labor,[70] does not invalidate the argument. Occupational mobility rarely carried a member of the laboring castes across the social divide into the *grihastha* (gentry) estate of the high literate castes who shunned manual work and, with elite Muslims, filled administrative positions. The view, institutionalized in Hindu law, that different jatis were endowed with special talents and diverse ends conditioned people to expect inequality, diffuse identities, and a plural moral order, and produced a "preference for harmony over abstract justice."[71] Since an individual's obligations and privileges were specific to his or her family, jati, and age, universal standards of political-moral behavior rarely galvanized people into cooperative political effort. The association of *nishkama* (desireless work), "impulse control," "self-abnegation," and suppression of hatred with the ideal, pure mind operated in the same direction.[72] Without shared expectations of checking leaders' outrageous behavior, or at least without patterns of association that taught political opposition and expression of aggressive feelings, collective action to change leadership or policy outside one's primary group was unlikely. Efforts to alter the principles of the political system were almost inconceivable in the absence of known reflection on or discussion about alternative forms of government.

The above discussion may seem to have implied that Bengal possessed a homogeneous pattern of behaviors. In fact, while particular behaviors and ideals prevailed, alternate models existed and were even dominant in certain sections of the population. The zamindar and his officers typically were authoritarian, alternating beneficence with coercion. The village community was more consensual, despite its hierarchy and ranked inequalities. Village headmen were chosen by agreement of the principal peasants. Villagers probably settled their disputes by compromise more often than by decision of a judicial authority. Villagers punished infringements of social convention by communal pressure, including social boycotts. New *abwabs* (irregular imposts) and revenue increases were accepted by peasant consent (frequently motivated by fear of coercion), not through formal agreement or contracts. When villagers opposed new demands, they assembled noisily, sometimes descending on local officials and occasionally even traveling to Calcutta.

There was a major religious reorientation in the Mughal period that may have simultaneously strengthened the self-consciousness of low and middle castes, softened Bengal's pluralism, and modified its social distinctions. This was the

[70] Colebrooke, *Remarks*, pp. 7 and 31.

[71] Ashis Nandy, "The Culture of Indian Politics: A Stock Taking," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Nov. 1970), pp. 66.

[72] Ibid., pp. 67–72.

broad spread of Vaishnavism. The effects of Vaishnavism on political behavior were ambiguous. The Gaudiya Vaishnava teaching of Chaitanya (1486–1533) and his disciple Nityananda, which stressed the accessibility of Krishna through devotional practices, without the need of Brahminical mediation, ritual, ritual purity, or jati dharma, swept through the lower and middle artisan and cultivating castes especially but also through numerous high caste families, leaving most high caste families, including most zamindars, as worshipers of Shakti or Shiva.[73] The Vaishnava emphasis on humility, non-violence, abstention from blood sacrifice and alcohol, control of sexual appetites, and intrinsic merit rather than inherited status, no doubt had a humanizing and self-esteem enhancing effect on the movement's followers. J.T. O'Connell has argued that the ethical patterns and "moral probity" encouraged by Vaishnavism may have defused potential "Hindu – Muslim confrontations" and "increased the effectiveness of Hindu businessmen and administrators in leading the Hindu population into fuller participation in the institutional life of Bengal while it was still under Muslim rule." Simultaneously, it helped integrate Hindu society by popularizing vegetarianism, avoidance of alcohol, and sexual restraint among the lower castes, thus lessening social distance by making them more acceptable to the higher castes who followed Sanskritic norms on these matters.[74] Yet to the degree that Vaishnavism encouraged quietism and accommodation with any polity which tolerated its devotional practices,[75] it may have promoted political passivity. Krishna-Dasa-Kaviraja's *Chaitanya-charitamrita* described the ideal *bhakta*, the true devotee, this way: he "will be humble as grass; he will take the name of Hari incessantly; he will be modest, and will honor others. He will be patient as a tree; though he be beaten and cursed, he will say nothing, as a tree says nothing even when it is cut."[76] Such attitudes may have given the exercise of arbitrary authority a freer field in which to operate in the eighteenth century, however much they may have paved the way for the egalitarian and participatory movements of the twentieth.

Mughals and British often commented on how easy Bengalis were to rule.

[73] Ralph W. Nicholas suggested that the "primary religious orientation" of Bengali Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas is "toward the manifestations of Sakti and, to a lesser extent, toward Shiva." "Ordinary people in rural Bengal pay primary allegiance" to Vaishnavism or Islam. "Vaishnavism and Islam in Rural Bengal," in David Kopf (ed.), *Bengal Regional Identity* (East Lansing, MI, 1969), pp. 33 and 37.

[74] Joseph T. O'Connell, "The Impact of Devotion upon the Societal Integration of Bengal," in Warren M. Gunderson (ed.), *Studies on Bengal* (East Lansing, MI, 1975), p 37. See also H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: The Ethnographic Glossary* (2 vols., Calcutta, 1891), vol. I, p. 442.

[75] O'Connell, "The Impact of Devotion," pp. 36–37.

[76] Edward C. Dimock, "The Ideal Man in Society in Vaisnava and Vaisnava – Sahajiya Literature," in Dimock (ed.), *Bengal Literature and History*, p. 71.

The author of the *Tarikh-i-Bangala* claimed that nazim Murshid Quli Khan "employed none but Bengali Hindus in the collection of the revenues, because they were most easily compelled by punishment to discover their malpractices; and nothing was to be apprehended from their pusillanimity."[77] The author of the *Siyar al-Mutakhkherin,* in discussing nazim Siraj-ud-daula's defeat of a rival in Purnia district, wrote that after the fighting, "everyone on both sides retired to his home, without any hindrance from the peasants of Pooraniah, who were not courageous enough to come down in numbers, and to plunder the living, or strip the dead, as they do in Hindostan."[78] British comments made similar points, emphasizing a willingness to suffer without complaint, or a perceived lack of courage.

Despite the rarity of armed rebellion, the elaborate etiquette of submission among inferiors, and the authoritarian presumptions of superiors, contrary currents were visible in Bengali culture. For all the willingness to allow ascribed leaders to monopolize decision-making, for all the strength of village-level consensus, individualistic strategies and resistance to community norms were far from absent. Visitors to Bengal today might say that a persistent contrariness permeates contemporary economic and political life; in the eighteenth century individual deviancy and autonomy-seeking were present but not dominant. These counter-currents took many different forms: the search for independent livelihood out from under the control of a master; an obdurate, non-violent resistance to what were considered as unreasonable exactions; and membership in religious sects which opposed the established social order and its consensually enforced norms. Brahmins and other high caste villagers eagerly sought to separate their lands from the parent estate as revenue-free holdings which liberated them from contentious encounters with local revenue collectors and from attendance at the superior's annual puniya or revenue ceremony. Cultivators worked to obtain their own agricultural holdings, rather than serve as the sub-tenants or laborers of other villagers, in order to avoid "the humiliation of dependence" and "the need to beg and curry favor."[79] Village watchmen and other village menials joined *dakaiti* (gang robbery) bands and pillaged affluent houses after the Company suspended zamindari police powers.

Perhaps nowhere was the tension between the norm of subordination to a superior and the aspiration to autonomy clearer than in the dismemberment of large zamindaris in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The largest estates in western Bengal had been cobbled together from smaller ones

77 Jadunath Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal*, vol. II, *Muslim Period, 1200–1757* (Dacca, 1948), p. 409.

78 Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, p. 214.

79 Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–1944* (New York, 1982), p. 27.

in the early eighteenth century and then stabilized under late Mughal and early Company rule. After the Permanent Settlement of 1793, thousands of *taluqs* (dependent tenures) were split off from the large estates and purchased at public or private auction by the former dependents of the major zamindars. Once-dependent tenure-holders, zamindari servants, and others flocked to the sales to buy up their ex-masters' holdings and become the superior landholder, demonstrating that while dependency had been a traditional state, for many it may not have been the preferred condition. In the commercial spirit of the age, many of these new rentier-speculators split their holdings into lots and sold their rental rights to other intermediaries between themselves and the cultivator.

Unquestionably, disintegration of older hierarchies and the quest for autonomy grew after the Permanent Settlement of 1793. As the Company collected revenue with unprecedented regularity and empowered rent collectors to arrest and distrain the property of tenants in arrears, the coercive pressures spread down through agrarian society until they reached the poorest villagers. Both the Company and landholders resumed *chakaran* (revenue-free service lands) held by low-caste village servants, converting land used for community purposes into individually owned holdings. It is reasonable to suppose that when the largely low-caste dakaits (gang robbers) ransacked the houses of more affluent villagers, they were responding to the new economic pressures and decline of indulgence that accompanied the Permanent Settlement. They may also have been expressing resentment at their exploitation and exclusion from most community affairs.[80]

Eighteenth-century Bengal was a highly complex and pluralistic society. Hinduism alone held out a broad spectrum of behavioral options, some that were acquisitive, violent, and sexually indulgent, others that were renunciatory, pacifist, abstemious, and celibate. Islamic and Christian rulers introduced their own imported models. Even before East India Company rule began, village societies mixed elements of a command and a capitalist economy, transactions in kind and cash, and free and unfree labor.

This book is divided into two parts: the first is general and largely thematic while the second is chronological and is organized around a case study of the Burdwan zamindari. Part I describes west Bengal's eighteenth-century agrarian political culture in terms of the major features of the local kingdoms and their relations with their subjects and with the Mughal and British states. It begins by examining the rise of the large zamindars in early eighteenth-century Bengal

[80] John R. McLane, "Bengali Bandits, Police and Landlords after the Permanent Settlement," in Anand A. Yang (ed.), *Crime and Criminality in British India* (Tucson, AZ, 1985), pp. 26–47.

and the growing pressure of the land revenue demand in the middle decades. Chapter 3 describes how the state and the major landholders extracted land revenue from their dependents. Chapter 4 analyzes the uses of coercion and the employment of detention and bodily pain in the Mughal and early Company periods. Chapter 5 examines beneficence, the role of gifts and patronage in binding the zamindar's subordinates to his person.

Part II is centered on a narrative of the evolution of a single zamindari: the Burdwan raj. Located to the west of the Hughli or Bhagirathi river, both southwest and northwest of Calcutta, the Burdwan estate was one of the largest and wealthiest zamindaris in eighteenth-century India. Its prosperity stemmed from the rich, alluvial rice and sugar-growing plains in its eastern sections and the proximity of its cultivators and weavers to the markets along the Hughli river.

The Burdwan raj family was non-Bengali, belonging to a Khatri jati of the Punjab. Punjabi Khatris were prominent among the groups who mediated between Mughals and agrarian society as administrators, bankers, and power brokers. An ancestor of the Burdwan rajas migrated from his native Punjab to Bengal a short time after the Mughal conquest from the Afghans began in the 1570s. Finding administrative employment under the Mughals, the family built up a modest zamindari by 1700. Then its fortunes soared. By 1760, the Burdwan zamindari covered over 5,000 square miles, or roughly double the size of Burdwan district as it existed in the last century of British rule. It contained, besides Burdwan district, most of the modern districts of Hughli and Howrah and northeastern Midnapur district as well. It was ceded to the English East India Company in 1760 and served as a laboratory for British administrators and Bengalis seeking more efficient methods of maximizing land revenue collections. After Company officials tried setting aside the zamindar of Burdwan and farming out the revenue to temporary collectors, the practice was copied for a brief period in the rest of Bengal in the 1770s. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the raja of Burdwan adopted the innovative practice of auctioning permanent leases for his subordinate rent-collection rights. Other landholders throughout west Bengal subsequently imitated it.

Although Burdwan's land management and family politics are illuminating for other areas of west Bengal, in some ways it was an atypical estate. In contrast to the other great zamindaris created in, or surviving from, the early eighteenth century, Burdwan emerged from the upheavals following the Permanent Settlement of 1793 with most of its territory intact. The Burdwan estate before zamindari abolition was over 4,000 square miles in area, with a population, less than a fifth of which was Muslim, of over 2 million.

Apart from its unusual size and survival, the Burdwan raj's evolution under Mughal and British rule parallels the changes in the zamindari system elsewhere in west Bengal. It expanded at the expense of its neighbors early in the century;

it suffered in the 1740s from Maratha brigandage; its revenue was raised beyond its apparent capacity to pay in the middle decades of the century when internal trade had ceased to grow and when the British began to use the territorial revenues, instead of bullion imports, to pay for their "investment"; it was turned over to temporary revenue contractors in the 1770s; its management was returned to the raj family in the late 1770s; its survival was threatened by the debts and the division of the family and the zamindari servants into bitter, feuding factions; it lost (but only temporarily) a major part of its territory in the post-1793 auction sales; it was forced to adopt more profit-oriented and less paternal management techniques in order to prevent the loss of the whole estate.

The justification for local history, if it is not to become antiquarianism, is to illustrate concretely the trends and processes in the surrounding society. We lack local histories for eighteenth-century Bengal and we lack provincial histories which view the early British period in Bengal in its necessary Mughal context.[81] This study aspires to contribute to the filling of both lacunae. Using the subject of revenue extraction as an entry into Bengali society, it searches for clues about the character of hierarchy and dependency, competition and autonomy-seeking in the agrarian society of late Mughal and early British Bengal.

[81] A notable exception to the practice of dividing Bengal's history at the British conquest is Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the Zamindars in Bengal, 1707–1772* (Dacca, 1982). Akhtar's book treats the zamindari system in greater technical detail than the present work and it analyzes the whole Bengali-speaking region but it gives less attention to the colonial period and to the normative Hindu bases of zamindari behavior. Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.2, also begins with the late Mughal period.

2 Nazims of Bengal and the large zamindars

The distinctive feature of political life in eighteenth-century rural Bengal was the continuous domination of the revenue-collecting system by a small number of very large landholders. At the close of *nawabi* rule, fifteen landholders paid 60 percent of the province's revenue;[1] three decades earlier and three decades later, the distribution was similar. To the steeply graded hierarchy of intermediaries and cultivators below, these landholders were rajas who gathered rents, dispensed patronage and entitlements, and upheld the ritual-moral order; to the government at Murshidabad above, they were zamindars who were the principal agency of local revenue extraction. The larger raja-zamindars controlled hundreds of villages and upwards of 1,000 square miles. This extreme concentration of territory in the hands of a small number of rajas dates from the administration of Murshid Quli Khan who led the Mughal provincial administration, apart from a three-year interruption, from late 1700 until his death in 1727. In this period, Bengal became virtually independent of the Mughal emperor, and the *subahdari* or governorship became hereditary, for the first time, in the family of Murshid Quli.

This chapter examines the higher or nawabi administrative-polical milieu in which the zamindars lived before 1750. The first chapter commented on the rise in the late Mughal period of new groups who took advantage of expanding commercial and political opportunities and who formed the base of support for newly autonomous regions. The expansive zamindars in Bengal were one such group. Unlike landed magnates in western India, the zamindars of Bengal confined their entrepreneurial ambitions largely to collaborative land stewardship and revenue farming; they did not develop significant military capabilities or rebellious designs, in contrast to the Jats of the north, the Marathas of the west, and the *poligars* (predatory chiefs) of the south. With the potential for large rental income and patronage to dispense, *attentisme* rather than rebelliousness characterized the zamindars of Bengal.

Both the zamindars and the governors of Bengal were served by members of

[1] Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.2, p. 55.

a second group, the high caste service gentry of scribes, accountants, and revenue collectors. As the role of imperial officers appointed from Delhi receded, the service gentry, like the zamindars, found their aspirations could be met under the existing regime. Similarly, commercial groups posed no threat to the continuation of nawabi rule until mid-century. In addition to trading, they provided credit to the government, zamindars and other revenue payers, and the growing communities of European traders along the rivers.

Prior to Murshid Quli, Bengal, as a frontier province, had not been fully integrated into the Mughal pattern of governance and had not been subjected to the same set of bureaucratic controls which the Mughals imposed in upper India. Raja Todar Mal, Akbar's finance minister, had prepared a revenue settlement for the province in the 1580s, before Bengal was pacified, before the Mughal conquest was completed. Todar Mal's settlement of Bengal differed from the upper India ones in several ways. First, the Bengal settlement was apparently based on the records of the Afghan administration and on what local landholders had paid in the past, without fresh assessments of the villages or measurement of peasant holdings, without an examination of the economic capacity of each peasant to pay revenue. The Mughal ideal elsewhere was to send assessors into the villages, fix an assessment on the individual peasant, and then collect directly from the peasant rather than from hereditary superior landholders. The ideal was not put into universal effect in any other province but Bengal was unusual among the major provinces in that no systematic village-by-village measurement and few direct state collections were attempted in Bengal before the eighteenth century.[2] Figures from Aurangzib's reign (1657-1707) indicate that only 1,538 of Bengal's 112,788 villages had been measured for purposes of the state's revenue assessment, whereas in the central provinces of Agra, Allahabad, Delhi, and Lahore, 93 percent of the villages had been measured.[3]

Mughal revenue administration in broad areas of Bengal, including Burdwan and most of the southwest, was indirect, through the hereditary rajas, chiefs, and other landholders. Moreover, again in contrast to other integral parts of the empire, Bengal's settlement underwent but slight revision over time. As a result of both large territorial additions (Assam and Tippera) to the province and a reassessment in 1658, Bengal's *jama* (revenue assessment) in the late years of Aurangzib's reign was about 22 percent higher than it had been after Todar Mal's original settlement in 1582. This was a much smaller increase than in most of the empire, whose average increase was 69 percent.[4] The relative stability of the state's demand on Bengal and the common reliance on hereditary landholders to collect it led Irfan Habib to conclude that the demand was made

2 Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 169–70, 218, and 230.
3 Computed from table in ibid., p. 4.
4 Ibid., p. 328.

"as if it were tribute rather than a varying tax on land or its produce."[5] Whether the state regularly collected its full theoretical demand is not known.

Bengal's economy

The semi-permanence of Bengal's revenue demand meant that the state's formal share of agricultural production declined in value during the seventeenth century, leaving Bengal "much under-rated" compared to other provinces in the empire.[6] Seventeenth-century Bengal enjoyed a high degree of stability, with freedom from major wars and famines, after Mughal armies subdued the rebellious *baro bhuiyas* (twelve landed chiefs) in the first two decades of the century. The population and area under cultivation are presumed by virtually all scholars to have risen. The rapid growth in the European and Asian markets for Bengal's cotton and silk goods and food products during the second half of the seventeenth century probably created new jobs and certainly brought an influx of American silver from Europe. The number of workers engaged in the manufacture of handicraft textiles may have risen to 1 million or 5 percent of the total population of perhaps 20 million.[7] With lowly-paid, highly-skilled artisans responsive to the particular tastes of foreign consumers, with inexpensive riverine transportation giving Indian merchants and the Dutch and English East India Companies access to the communities of weavers, spinners, and winders in the interior, and with Mughal authorities eager to profit from the silver imports and duties paid by the European companies, Bengal became Europe's "chief trading partner."[8] And since much of the silver with which Europeans purchased Bengali goods was minted into rupees, the value of the currency was inflated and the real value of the state's jama (revenue assessment) declined. By one estimate, the real value of the state's formal demand in the late 1600s was 50 percent less than in the late 1500s for the same area of Bengal.[9]

Many Europeans commented upon Bengal's prosperity. François Bernier wrote after two visits between 1656 and 1668 that Bengal was "the finest and most fruitful country in the world" although he admitted "strangers seldom find the air salubrious."[10] Thomas Bowrey, a factor for the English East Company

[5] Ibid., p. 177.

[6] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 27.

[7] The figures for both workers and total population are highly speculative. Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630–1720* (Princeton, NJ, 1985), pp. 246–47.

[8] K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 207 and 247. Also, Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, p. 43.

[9] Philip B. Calkins, "Revenue Administration and the Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700–1740" (University of Chicago, Ph.D. dissertation, 1972), p. 101.

[10] François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D. 1656–1668* (2nd edn., London, 1916), pp. 437 and 441.

in Bengal in the 1670s and 1680s, said it "is one of the largest and most Potent Kingdoms of Hindostan ... this Kingdome is now become most famous and Flourishinge."[11] Robert Orme, in 1752, thought Bengal "is the most fertile of any [province] in the universe."[12] Whenever other parts of India experienced dearth, Europeans assumed Bengal could send food since it normally exported sizeable quantities of rice, sugar, and clarified butter.[13]

Bengal appeared fertile and productive because it provided at favorable prices large quantities of goods desired in other parts of India, Asia, and Europe. However, virtually no one claimed that the general population of Bengal was well-off or that the bullion used to purchase its goods was broadly distributed. Few of the seventeenth-century European travelers' accounts commented on the standard of welfare for the Bengali lower classes, because the authors tended to keep to the rivers and were primarily interested in trade conditions and perhaps because their experience in Europe had conditioned them to expect extreme poverty. Travelers to other parts of India, however, did remark on how the Mughal nobility expropriated all but a meager subsistence from the producing classes. François Bernier, for example, sought to explain why the people of India "have less the appearance of a moneyed people than those of other parts of the globe" and placed the major blame on the extortionate practices of the people who collected the Mughal revenue who, he wrote, "have an authority almost absolute over the peasantry, and nearly as much over the artisans and merchants of the towns and villages within their district; and nothing can be imagined more cruel and oppressive than the manner in which it is exercised." He believed they exercised "a tyranny often so excessive as to deprive the peasant and artisan of the necessaries of life, and leave them to die of misery and exhaustion."[14]

Modern historians have reached similar conclusions without specifying, just as Bernier did not, whether their generalizations included Bengal.[15] Irfan Habib, who was especially interested in the condition and treatment of the lower orders throughout Mughal territory, is significantly silent about the subject in Bengal, which suggests that the Persian sources did not comment on the subject. There are a few clues about the distribution of income in seventeenth-century Bengal. Habib does mention a rare famine in Bengal, in the Dacca locality in 1662-3. In that famine, "official exactions and obstructions" interfered with the supply

[11] Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal, 1669 to 1679* (Cambridge, 1905), p. 131.
[12] Orme, *Historical Fragments*, p. 404.
[13] Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, p. 207.
[14] Bernier, *Travels*, pp. 225–26.
[15] For example, Habib, *Agrarian System*, chapter 6; Jadunath Sarkar, *Mughal Administration* (4th edn., Calcutta, 1952), p. 69.

of foodgrains to the stricken area.[16] Bihar experienced a major famine in 1671 which stretched into the northwest corner of Bengal. It is clear from John Marshall's diary entries that neither the Mughal government at Dacca nor local private agency took effective or perhaps any action to relieve the suffering. He wrote at Patna:

> Great number of Slaves to be brought for 4 an. and 8 an. per peece, and good ones for 1 r. per peece; but they are exceeding leane when bought, and if they eat but very little more than ordinary of rice, or eat any flesh, butter or any strong meat their faces and hands and codds swell immediately exceedingly.

The Mughal *kotwal* (police officer) recorded over 90,000 starvation deaths in Patna and its suburbs.[17]

Apart from rare anecdotes, we have only indirect evidence of how Bengal's growing wealth was shared. Bengal's marginal advantage in international trade was, after all, a function in part of the low wages paid to its artisans and low prices paid to the peasants who grew rice, sugar, cotton, mulberry leaves, and other items. Bengali textile artisans were said to have earned one sixth of what their counterparts in France received.[18] Weavers usually would not undertake a contract without an advance, perhaps because they were too poor to do so.

It is possible that population growth absorbed much of the new wealth of the late seventeenth century, limiting the opportunities of common cultivators to share it. In addition, Mughal officials assigned to Bengal may have siphoned off a major portion of the new currency. As the margin between the formal claim of the state and the money in circulation widened, Mughal officials found means to divert large sums to their personal treasuries, despite imperial regulations designed to limit this. Members of the imperial ruling family assigned to Bengal, such as Shah Shuja, Shaista Khan, and Azim-ud-din, and other officials as well, accumulated extraordinary fortunes while in Bengal, partly through extortion and unauthorized exactions, partly through monopolistic trading practices, and partly through the administration of their personal revenue assignments.[19] Reports of uncertain reliability said that Shaista Khan (nazim 1664-78 and 1679-88) personally accumulated Rs. 9 *krors*[20] in eighteen years, Khan Jahan Bahadur Khan (nazim 1688-89) removed Rs. 2 krors in one year, and Prince

[16] Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 107.

[17] Shafaat Ahmad Khan, *John Marshall in India: Notes and Observations in Bengal, 1668–1672* (London, 1927), pp. 150–53.

[18] Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, p. 273.

[19] See Abdul Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan and his Times* (Dacca, 1963), p. 3; Satish Chandra, "Commercial Activities of the Mughal Emperors during the Seventeenth Century," *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 78 (July-Dec. 1959), pp. 92–97; and Moreland, *Agrarian System*, pp. 198–200.

[20] One kror equals 10 million or 100 lakhs.

Azim-ud-din (nazim 1697-1712) removed Rs. 8 krors in 1706 after his first nine years.[21] This suggests that these nazims personally accumulated Rs. 19 krors or the equivalent of over half Bengal's jama in those years (Rs. 1.13 krors X 28 years = Rs. 36.68 krors). Such figures seem barely creditable and perhaps were figurative rather than real. They leave open the possibility that the taxes recorded in Mughal records grossly understated the amount officials collected.

Even if we assume that nazims accumulated huge fortunes by taking payments for the right to collect the revenues and by other means, the opportunities for other imperial officers to draw money out of rural Bengal in the seventeenth century were probably limited by a special feature of Mughal administration in that province. This was the relatively small portion of Bengal that was assigned to temporary, imperial officers. By Aurangzib's reign, four-fifths of the empire as a whole had been assigned as *jagirs* (maintenance land) to centrally appointed officers (mansabdars).[22] The revenue from jagir land went to the *jagirdars* in lieu of salary to cover personal expenses, support imperial troops or the imperial navy, and to pay for the judicial and revenue administration. But in Bengal, only one third of the revenue was so assigned.[23] The other two thirds of the revenue was collected by hereditary chiefs and zamindars, who paid into the provincial treasury for transmission to the emperor, and was designated *khalisa* (resources reserved for the imperial treasury), to distinguish it from the jagir land.[24]

In the Mughal system of checks and balances, the state appointed two sets of officers to watch the zamindars in the khalisa lands. *Faujdars* (regional military commanders) were assigned to Burdwan, Hughli, and perhaps eight other widely scattered towns to observe and, when necessary, coerce recalcitrant zamindars. The faujdar's "special business" was to ensure that no zamindar accumulated an excessive number of rifles or cannon, built a fort without permission,[25] or used more royal paraphernalia, such as elephants, palanquins, or kettle-drums, than had been sanctioned. The nazims also employed an elaborate set of record keepers called *qanungos* (expounders of laws and customs) to check on both the zamindars and the temporary revenue officers. They were expected to keep records on many matters connected with cultivation and revenue, including the particulars of each harvest, receipts, arrears, crop prices, the areas cultivated and left waste, land transfers, revenue-free land, and zamindari successions. The position was usually hereditary and a qanungo or

21 Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, pp. 391–92, 405, and 413.
22 Ali, *Mughal Nobility*, pp. 74–75.
23 James Grant, "An Historical and Comparative Analysis of the Finances of Bengal" (1786), *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. II, p. 186.
24 At any given time, a portion of the khalisa lands was under the charge of temporary collectors (*amils*) or revenue farmers (*ijaradars*) because of zamindars' defalcations or failure of heirs.
25 Khan, *Seir*, vol. III, p. 176.

two served in each of the hundreds of *parganas* or fiscal units into which Bengal was divided.[26] In theory, they provided the provincial diwan (chief revenue officer) and his subordinates with the capacity to audit accounts, settle local disputes, and learn about local customs. Abul Fazl, in the *Ain-i Akbari*, described the qanungos as "the refuge of the husbandmen," assuming that without state oversight the zamindars would exploit their dependents.[27] The main source of information about how they functioned in the Mughal period was the testimony of hereditary qanungos in the 1780s.[28] If those accounts are accurate, the early eighteenth-century qanungos offered a vigilant diwan useful information for checking fraud and oppression in revenue collection although they colluded with landholders and temporary officers at least occasionally.[29]

Despite the qanungos and the faujdars, the Mughal government maintained no extensive revenue machinery or administrative presence in many parts of the khalisa lands capable of drawing out much more than the formal revenue demand and the customary fines levied upon the hereditary succession of a new zamindar.[30] Southwestern Bengal (south of the Ganges, west of the Hughli) was almost entirely free of jagirdars, judging from Mir Qasim's accounts of 1763, when the contiguous southwestern zamindaris of Bishnupur, Burdwan, Muhammad Aminpur, and Pachet, covering over 10,000 square miles, contained jagir lands with a jama of only Rs. 20,063.[31] Mughal mansabdars, most of whom were non-Bengali, typically held their assigned lands in the north-central districts of Dacca, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Rajshahi.[32] Before Murshid Quli Khan's administration, mansabdars were transferred frequently from one jagir to another, often every three or four years,[33] so that they relied on subordinate officers, including qanungos and local landholders, for their collections and knowledge of their villages.

The structural conflict between zamindars and mansabdars was a factor in the collapse of the Mughal empire outside Bengal at the end of Aurangzib's reign. The progressive rise in the mansabdars' demands upon the landholders and the peasantry, occasioned by the inflation in the stated value of their jagirs,

26 At the time of the 1728 settlement, Bengal had 1,660 parganas.

27 R.B. Ramsbotham, *Studies in the Land Revenue History of Bengal, 1769–1787* (London, 1926), p. 135.

28 Report on the office of qanungo by J.D. Patterson, 18 May 1787, in ibid., pp. 162–97.

29 Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 290 and 297.

30 Calkins speculated that "although many groups probably shared in the increased profits of the revenue collection" in the first four decades of the eighteenth century, "it is likely that those who benefited most, proportionately, were those at the lower levels of the revenue system." "Revenue Administration," p. 78.

31 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 248–50.

32 Ibid., p. 245.

33 Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 267–70.

alienated important dominant peasant groups such as the Jats in the Agra region, the Satnamis and Sikhs in the Punjab, and the Marathas in the Deccan.[34] As peasant revolts against the rising revenue demands broke out, zamindars often joined or assumed the leadership of the rebels. Why were peasants willing to fight alongside zamindars? Because, according to both European and Persian sources, hereditary zamindars were less oppressive to the peasantry than the often-transferred jagirdars and had a much longer-term relationship to preserve.[35] In Irfan Habib's view, zamindari leadership of the revolts which shook the empire "seems to have been of decisive significance in merging the risings of the oppressed with the war between two oppressing classes."[36]

Murshid Quli Khan

Bengal experienced only one significant conflict between zamindars and mansabdars while Mughal authority unraveled in upper and western India. This was the revolt of Shova Singh and Rahim Khan in 1696-98.[37] The stability of the nominal revenue demand and the paucity of mansabdars in Bengal may account for absence of trouble before the 1690s. After Murshid Quli Khan was appointed diwan in 1700, he reduced the potential for conflict by curbing the influence of the major mansabdars and by strengthening the role of certain zamindars. Both policies were ostensibly based on ethnic considerations. From the outset of Mughal rule, partisan ethnic loyalties among the Mughal, Turani, Persian, and Afghan clans who occupied the higher mansabdari appointments required the emperor's vigilance. Akbar built his marital and political links with the Rajputs to offset the threats from the Mughal and Turani nobility.[38] A similar strategy motivated Murshid Quli's policies towards the non-Bengali mansabdars and the local zamindars. Murshid Quli arrived in Bengal as an outsider to the mansabdari class. He had been born into a poor Brahmin family in the Deccan, had been sold to a Persian as a small child, had been raised in Persia as a Shi'a Muslim, and had returned as a revenue officer to the Deccan where he attracted Aurangzib's attention and respect. Aurangzib transferred Murshid Quli to Bengal as diwan in 1700,[39] at a time when most of the empire's revenue had been alienated to jagirdars and when the imperial treasury was dangerously low,

34 Ibid., pp. 341–47.
35 Ibid., pp. 320–21.
36 Ibid., p. 333.
37 It is discussed in chapter 7 below. It is not known to have been a peasant revolt.
38 Wink, *Land and Sovereignty*, p. 53.
39 Murshid Quli was sent back to the Deccan upon Aurangzib's death in 1707 and then returned to Bengal as diwan in 1710. He was appointed nazim in 1717 and he died in 1727. Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, pp. 15–59.

drained by the expensive effort to subdue the Deccan where the mansabdars' pay was three years in arrears.[40] Previous executives in Bengal had been lax in their fiscal management, had been distracted by their private trading activities, and, in the case of Ibrahim Khan (nazim 1689-97) and his faujdars, had failed to act effectively against the major rebellion by Shova Singh and Rahim Khan in southwest Bengal in 1696-98.[41] Aurangzib supported Murshid Quli against other imperial officials in his efforts to restore discipline and to reorganize the province's finances. An astute and harsh administrator, Murshid Quli began immediately to send the hard-pressed emperor about Rs. 1 kror each year.[42] His success in supplying Delhi with revenue, combined with the erosion of imperial power following Aurangzib's death in 1707, eventually gave Murshid Quli virtual autonomy in the conduct of Bengal's affairs.

Murhid Quli imposed a much stricter regimen on Bengal than it had previously. His officers arrested, imprisoned, and in some cases tortured zamindars who were in arrears. He sent officers to measure and reassess particular villages. He appointed temporary revenue farmers (ijaradars) to collect the revenue from many localities.[43] A Persian chronicle completed about 1787 stated that Murshid Quli initially put "a complete stop to the authority of zamindars over the collection and disbursement of the Imperial Revenue" (an obvious exaggeration), that he starved and forcibly converted to Islam some Hindu zamindari servants, with their families, whose estates were in arrears, and that he forbade zamindars to ride in *palkis* (litters).[44] With his aggressive fiscal measures, Murshid Quli raised the annual collections closer to the state's demand. In 1722, he promulgated a new settlement for the whole province. The 1722 settlement was Rs. 142 *lakhs* or 9 percent higher than the 1656 settlement of Rs. 131 lakhs. Since his predecessors probably failed to collect the full demand, Murshid Quli may have increased the actual collections by 20 percent or more.[45]

Mansabdars whose families had served the Mughals for generations were

[40] Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 401.

[41] Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, pp. 1–2.

[42] Ibid., p. 97.

[43] Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 409.

[44] Salim, *Riyazu*, pp. 255–58.

[45] James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 191, and Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, pp. 76ff. Estimates of the increase are plagued by different methods of calculation. F.D. Ascoli, using Grant's figures, estimated the increase between 1658 and 1722 at 13.5 percent. *Early Revenue History of Bengal and the Fifth Report, 1812* (Oxford 1917), p. 28. Calkins suggested on the basis of Persian figures that Murshid Quli lowered the jama on his arrival in Bengal to reflect the actual, low level of collections so that his 1722 settlement was 20 percent higher than the 1700 jama but only 9 percent higher than the 1658 jama. "Revenue Administration," pp. 29–30. Calkins also cited figures used by John Shore to show that Murshid Quli raised the actual collections from Rs. 117 lakhs in 1700 to Rs. 141 lakhs in 1722, or by 22.5 percent. "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group," p. 802.

also victims of Murshid Quli's new discipline, austerity, and eventual freedom from imperial protection. Murshid Quli transferred some of their jagirs from Bengal to Orissa while distributing the major offices and remaining jagirs in Bengal to his newly arrived relatives from Persia. The result was that the proportion of Bengal's revenue assigned to jagirdars fell to one fourth, the khalisa income was correspondingly increased, and potential mansabdar opponents, who were jealous of this relative newcomer's power, were removed from the province.[46] Later, Murshid Quli cut back the allowances of the remaining mansabdars, including his own, and he reduced the size of the imperial armed forces.[47] With these economies, he was assured of having sufficient revenue to send annual payments to Delhi and, in effect, to purchase freedom from imperial interference. His motive in increasing revenue was clear enough. His removal of members of the older mansabdar class may have been more than a strengthening of his political base. He may have sensed the "demoralization" of the empire's mansabdars that was most noticeable in the south. By the time of Aurangzib's death, Mughal military failures had "shaken" mansabdars who "saw that the structure that – for over a century – had supplied order, rationality, sustenance, and meaning to their lives was rapidly weakening." After Aurangzib's military failures and death, the warrior-administrators whose identity was bound up in personal service to a strong emperor and in military victory increasingly pursued individualistic strategies of survival.[48] Perhaps an understanding of this disintegration of mansabdari mission and morale shaped Murshid Quli's administrative innovations in Bengal. After 1713, the emperor stopped transferring mansabdars to Bengal.

More important for the evolution of Bengal's agrarian structure was Murshid Quli Khan's policy of allowing certain landholders in western Bengal to absorb the small territories of their neighbors, with the result that where many zamindars had once paid directly to government, now a small number of giant holdings dominated much of Bengal. The process, as best as it can be reconstructed, had two stages. In the first, Murshid Quli awarded contracts for some of Bengal to revenue farmers or ijaradars to collect from the small landholders.[49] The most successful farmers were men who had held or whose recent ancestors

[46] James Grant, "Historial and Comparative Analysis," p. 191. The largest remaining jagirs were Murshid Quli's own, covering about 5,500 square miles, scattered mostly within the Nadia and Rajshahi zamindaris; the diwan's jagir, covering about 2,000 square miles; and the *bakshi*'s (army commander), encompassing about 800 square miles. Ibid., p. 237.

[47] Ibid., p. 188.

[48] J.F. Richards, "The Imperial Crisis in the Deccan," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Feb. 1976), p. 249. Wink doubted that the mansabdars in the Deccan were demoralized: "This was rather a period of unprecedented opportunities." *Land and Sovereignty*, p. 63.

[49] Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 411. Karim emphasizes that "there is no evidence to show that Murshid Quli Khan farmed out the lands to the highest bidder ... nor of the *zamindars* or collectors being allowed a free hand to deal with the ra'yats." *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 93.

had held revenue administration positions under the nazims. Each farmer had to offer a *malzamin* or a security who would co-sign in return for a small percentage of the revenue, in case the farmer failed in his obligations. The malzamin was often a banker, in some cases a member of the Jagat Seth banking family who enjoyed the privilege of minting coins for Murshid Quli's and subsequent regimes and whose influence on nawabi financial and political affairs was increasingly decisive.

In the second stage of the elevation of the large zamindars, certain zamindars and ijaradars were permitted to absorb the taluqs of other landholders. This expansion took place through military conquest, administrative transfer, and occasionally purchase, all sanctioned by Murshid Quli. Given Murshid Quli's emphasis on efficient revenue collection, it may be presumed that he encouraged or allowed the aggregation of land under those zamindars who demonstrated promptness in their payments and that he found large zamindars and ijaradars, backed by bankers' guarantees, improved agencies of collection. It is also apparent that he trusted the local zamindars more than most Mughal mansabdars, who in many cases resented Murshid Quli's policies and ethnic background and were no longer subject to Delhi's restraining discipline. Thus the pattern of personnel practices was to collect most land revenue in west Bengal through large Hindu zamindars[50] and in east and north Bengal through a mixture of jagirdars and smaller Hindu and Muslim zamindars; to use the Marwari Hindu banking house of the Jagat Seths for banking, minting, and remitting revenue to Delhi; to staff the superior military and non-revenue positions with his own Shi'a relatives from Persia; and to assign important revenue administrative positions to a combination of Bengali and upcountry Hindus.[51] It adroitly balanced ethnic groups and government functions: Bengalis and non-Bengalis; Hindus and Muslims; and district collectors, central administration, bankers, and the military. It achieved relative stability and harmony, at least until the Maratha invasions of the 1740s.

The most powerful Hindu zamindars of mid- and late eighteenth-century Bengal acquired the bulk of their estates under Murshid Quli Khan. These estates were so large that when Shuja-ud-din, Murshid Quli's son-in-law and successor, concluded a new settlement in 1728, he reorganized Bengal's fiscal divisions around these zamindaris. The four estates with the largest jama, all newly expanded, were Burdwan, Dinajpur, Nadia, and Rajshahi. The rajas of two were non-Bengali Hindus: the Burdwan zamindar was descended from

[50] The Birbhum zamindari, 5,000 square miles in area but lighly populated, was left under its Muslim "Pathan raja," whose family may have been converts to Islam. Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), p. 24.

[51] Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, pp. 68–70.

Punjabi Khatris and the Dinajpur zamindar, on Bengal's northern frontier, was an upcountry Kayastha. The zamindar of Nadia, lying east of the middle section of the Bhagirathi or Hughli river, was a Bengali Brahmin, as was the zamindar of Rajshahi, which sprawled to the north and northeast of Nadia on both sides of the Ganges, encircling Murshidabad. These four zamindaris, whose rajas' ancestors had risen from modest revenue or administrative posts, paid a third of Bengal's jama under the settlement of 1728.[52] The rapid growth of these Hindu zamindaris was a sharp reversal of the Mughal policy of distrusting zamindars. Jadunath Sarkar wrote that Murshid Quli had created "a new landed aristocracy" in Bengal.[53] Philip Calkins described the elevation of the zamindars and domiciled Hindu officials and bankers as "the formation of a regionally oriented ruling group."[54] The realignment of regional elites and the removal of part of the non-Bengali mansabdar class from their role as competitors with and supervisors of the domiciled elites led to a fresh concentration of power, status, and wealth. The large zamindars established themselves as major partners with the Mughal subahdars (governors) in ruling Bengal, commanding small armies, administering justice, and building palaces, forts, and temples that by Bengal's modest architectural standards were impressive in size. The rajas of Burdwan, Dinajpur, and Rajshahi had made the coveted transition from service to landholding, to local kingship.[55]

Later Nazims

Murshid Quli's restructuring of the zamindari system survived through the nawabi period and well into the Company period. His revenue demand of Rs. 141 lakhs did not. The later nazims of Bengal imitated Murshid Quli's example and after 1756 raised the demand to unrealizable levels. Murshid Quli's increase of 9 percent in 1722 appears modest enough, in view of inflation and presumed population growth over the many decades since the previous settlement of 1658,

[52] The largest zamindari assessments under the settlement of 1728, which confirmed the arrangements made by Murshid Quli Khan, were:
Burdwan Rs. 20,47,506
Rajshahi Rs. 16,96,087
Nadia Rs. 5,94,846
Dinajpur Rs. 4,62,964
Birbhum Rs. 3,66,509
Rokinpur Rs. 2,42,943
James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 194–98.

[53] Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 409.

[54] Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group," p. 799.

[55] Rokinpur, the sixth largest zamindari in 1728 and scattered "throughout Bengal," belonged to the chief qanungo of the province who was thus simultaneously a zamindar and in service. James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 197.

although as we have seen his *hasil* (actual collections) may have exceeded that of earlier nazims by much more than 9 percent. Shuja-ud-din (1727-39) imposed abwabs (additional cesses) of Rs. 19.14 lakhs,[56] after the *naib* (deputy) qanungos, in order "to ingratiate themselves" with the new nazim, pointed out sources of zamindari income he might tax.[57] Alivardi Khan (1740-56) added further abwabs of Rs. 22.25 lakhs.[58] Altogether, Murshid Quli Khan, Shuja-ud-din, and Alivardi Khan added roughly 40 percent to the pre-1722 jama of Rs. 131.15 lakhs.

Virtually no information survives to indicate how the increments were distributed among various classes of intermediate collectors and peasants. At the highest level, Shuja-ud-din and Alivardi continued to collect through large zamindars in western Bengal and through a combination of various sized zamindars and jagirdars elsewhere. Shuja's and Alivardi's new abwabs produced few known strains in agrarian society. John Shore believed that the purpose of the abwabs was to obtain the zamindar's increased profits but that the effect was to lead the zamindars to raise the peasants' rents by at least 50 percent.[59] James Grant was critical of the abwabs because the subahdars made little effort to apportion them according to the state of cultivation in particular areas rather than because he doubted the ability of the population in general to pay more.[60]

If the later nawabs or their qanungos had information about how much the peasants were producing or how much their superiors were assessing them, British commentators of the late eighteenth century did not have access to it. It does appear, however, that an increased portion of the state's income was spent or hoarded within Bengal, beginning with Alivardi. Alivardi suspended payments to the emperor during the Maratha invasions and did not resume regular payments after the invasions ended in 1751.[61] When not paid, this saved the government of Bengal roughly Rs. 1 kror annually or over half of Alivardi's jama. It is evident, nevertheless, that the nazims and their relatives continued to engross enormous sums, far in excess of what their personal jagirs could have yielded. Alivardi was said to have found and confiscated Rs. 5 krors from Sarfaraz's private treasury when he overthrew him in 1739.[62] When Afghan rebels seized and tortured Alivardi's brother, Haji Ahmad, in 1748, they found

56 Ibid., p. 212.
57 Report on the office of qanungo, in Ramsbotham, *Studies*, p. 168.
58 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 221.
59 John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, paras. 40–1.
60 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 219 and 223.
61 Ibid., p. 222.
62 Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 90. Yusuf Ali was Sarfaraz's son-in-law. Ibid., p. 79.

a treasure of Rs. 70 lakhs. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Haji Ahmad's son and faujdar of Rangpur, had an estimated fortune of Rs. 1 kror upon his death.[63] When Raj Ballav, the Vikrampur Baidya who was diwan to Ghasiti Begam, Alivardi's widowed daughter, asked the British for refuge in Calcutta from Nazim Siraj-ud-daula in 1756, his "treasure and jewells" were estimated to be worth Rs. 53 lakhs.[64] Ghasiti Begam's own treasure, inherited from her husband, Nawazish Muhammad Khan, long-time governor of Dacca, was valued at over Rs. 10 krors.[65] In a province in which the annual revenue demand was under Rs. 2 krors,[66] if these fortunes approached the estimates, their accumulation may have depressed economic activity. Of course, some of the hoarded wealth found its way back into circulation. For example, Shuja-ud-din, anticipating his death, awarded two months pay to every person in his service, including the menial servants in his harem.[67] And the nazims escheated the fortunes of deceased officers. But even when put back into circulation in the pay of the army and administrators and in building projects, probably not much reached villagers other than weavers because nawabi spending in rural areas on irrigation, flood control, roads, and relief from natural disaster was practically non-existent.[68]

Whether or not major portions of nawabi fortunes were extorted from zamindars, the collaboration between the nazim and both large and lesser zamindars grew during Shuja-ud-din's subahdarship (1727-39). Shuja examined the cases of zamindars arrested by Murshid Quli and still confined, and he released those he believed to be innocent of embezzlement and other crimes. He gathered the remaining imprisoned landholders around him and invited them to state how they would behave if he gave them their freedom. "The poor people, who had been for years languishing in confinement, and had undergone a variety of torments and racks, surprised at this address, broke forth in encomiums on his generosity and goodness" and swore to be punctual with their revenue and "obedient and dutiful in whatever services his goodness might think fit to command." Shuja gave each a khilat appropriate to his rank, took written agreements, and dismissed them with instructions to remit their revenues through the banking house of Jagat Seth.[69] He also demanded *nazrs* (offering,

63 Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, p. 137, translator's footnote.

64 William Tooke's Narrative, S.C. Hill (ed.), *Indian Record Series, Bengal in 1756–1757. A Selection of Public and Private Papers Dealing with the Affairs of the British in Bengal during the Reign of Sirajuddaula* (3 vols., London, 1905), vol. I, p. 249.

65 Karim Ali, *Muzaffar-namah*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 62.

66 John Shore estimated in 1789 that Bengal's gross agricultural product did not exceed Rs. 8.5 krors. Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 109.

67 Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, p. 322.

68 However, the nazims did provide for flood control by granting zamindars deductions in their jama for use in river embankment construction.

69 Ibid., pp. 279–80.

presents) from them, beyond what Murshid Quli had demanded. He raised Rs. 40 lakhs by selling to the zamindars the horses, cattle, carpets, and curtains he had confiscated from the estate of Murshid Quli Khan.[70]

While Shuja relaxed the pressure on the interior zamindars, he tightened control over the chiefs towards Bengal's frontiers. In the first half of the century, the population in the outlying regions of the province was growing. As more land was brought under the plough, the nazims demanded that the revenue or tribute paid by the frontier rajas be raised accordingly. Shuja sent armies against the rajas of Birbhum, Dinajpur, Kuch Bihar, and Tippera for this purpose. Troops also "desolated" Rangpur.[71] No doubt these expeditions served as reminders to the interior zamindars of what they could expect if they resisted the new abwabs.

Zamindari loyalty

After Shuja-ud-din's reign, the zamindars' partnership with the nazims of Bengal disintegrated gradually and unevenly. It had never been a secure or easy one, based as it was more on short-term convenience than shared language and culture or long-term mutual interest. Murshid Quli Khan had shown his distrust of local landholders by placing ijaradars and amils (temporary collectors) over them, by arresting, torturing, and/or dispossessing defaulters and by crushing Sitaram Ray of Bhushna, a large rebellious zamindari in southeastern Bengal. His decision to allow the Burdwan, Dinajpur, and Rajshahi zamindaris to absorb hundreds of smaller holdings was a mark of his lack of confidence in the lesser landholders. The addition of abwabs to what had been a stable revenue demand indicated that the nazims believed the zamindars had been paying less than they were capable of. The abwabs can only have been unpopular with the landholders.

From time to time, the nazims called on the larger zamindars for military help. When zamindars responded, they were rarely more than a minor, auxiliary factor in nawabi campaigns. Even during the repeated Maratha invasions of 1742-51, zamindars sometimes made their own arrangements with the invaders rather than defend their territories or join the nawabi forces. Nawabi officials in Bengal seemed to regard zamindars with the suspicious wariness of Mughals elsewhere. Ghulam Husain Tabatabai, whose family served a succession of eighteenth-century nazims, described the zamindars as

> a set of men faithless to a high degree, short-sighted, impatient of control, ever ready, on the least appearance of revolution, to turn their backs on their masters, and to forget

70 Salim, *Riyazu*, p. 289.

71 Ibid., pp. 300 and 305–06; and Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, pp. 426–28.

the most important favours received at their hands ... Their strange and inconsistent character [requires] at all times the strong grasp of a curbing hand.[72]

This may have been a common nawabi view.

The arrests, imprisonments, and dispossessions under Murshid Quli Khan, the attacks on the frontier zamindars by Shuja-ud-din, and the volatility of nawabi and imperial politics, especially in the dynastic succession disputes, taught the zamindars how dangerous the higher political environment was and helps to explain the conditional quality of zamindari loyalty about which Ghulam Husain complained. The relative stability of nawabi rule in Bengal in the first half of the eighteenth century was only relative to the fractious, deadly struggles at the center of Mughal dominions. The threat of intrigue, violence, and invasion hovered over nawabi politics. Nazim Azim-ud-din, grandson of Aurangzib and son of the future emperor Bahadur Shah I, plotted to have Murshid Quli killed in 1702. Ziaullah, the Bengal diwan during Murshid Quli's temporary assignment to the Deccan, was assassinated by rebellious troops in 1710 and Nazim Azim-ud-din was killed in upper India in 1712 during his brother's war to succeed their father, Bahadur Shah I.[73] Zamindars even witnessed a father's violence against his own son, in 1727 when Murshid Quli died. Shuja-ud-din, Murshid Quli's Afshar Turk son-in-law, deployed a large army to prevent Sarfaraz, his own son and Murshid Quli's favorite, from becoming nazim.[74] As soon as the zamindars heard of Shuja's victory, "several" called on him during his journey from Orissa to Murshidabad and received khilats, and others planned to send their *vakils* (representatives) to meet him as he approached Murshidabad and, if Shuja approved, to "pay their respects" in person.[75] Shuja's subahdarship (1727-39) was largely free of internal friction among nawabi officers, despite his strained relations with his son, Sarfaraz. Trouble resumed with Shuja's death in 1739.

Sarfaraz succeeded his father as nazim. He had less ability and a weaker character. Sarfaraz's Turko-Arab diwan, Haji Ahmad, and his brother, Alivardi Khan, the deputy governor of Bihar, conspired with the banker Jagat Seth and others to overthrow Sarfaraz. In 1740, Alivardi led a sizeable army into Bengal, defeated and killed Sarfaraz, and established a new ruling family at Murshidabad.[76]

When he arrived at the capital, Alivardi's Muslim military officers swore allegiance on the *Qur'an* while Hindus pledged their loyalty by touching a Brahmin's feet and a *tulsi* (holy basil plant) twig, and the officers of government

72 Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, pp. 393–94.
73 Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, pp. 403–06.
74 Ibid., p. 423.
75 Akhtar, *Role of the Zamindars*, p. 28.
76 Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, pp. 436ff.

and major citizens of Murshidabad presented him with nazrs.[77] However, for all his talents and conciliatory treatment of surviving members of the family of Murshid Quli and Sarfaraz, Alivardi was unable to overcome all the resentment against his treachery in overthrowing the family on whose patronage the careers of Alivardi and his brother had been built. Vengeful relatives and supporters of Sarfaraz invited Raghuji Bhonsla, Maratha chief at Nagpur, to invade Bengal.[78] From 1742 to 1751, western Bengal was subjected to devastating Maratha raids. Nawabi revenue collections in the west plummeted and were increased in the east and north to compensate. At the same time, local nawabi administrative controls loosened, nawabi legitimacy was compromised. No previous Mughal government had failed to protect the province from repeated external invasion and the accompanying economic dislocation. The slippage in the nazim's authority was demonstrated by the ascendancy and then alienation of the Afghan general Ghulam Mustafa Khan, who commanded Alivardi's largely Afghan troops. During the campaigns to drive the Marathas from Bengal, Ghulam became so powerful, one chronicler wrote, that the aging Alivardi "had not the power to issue any order on any affair of the realm without taking his advice ... therefore every zamindar of Bengal turned to him, so that nothing but the name remained to the diwan for the revenue collection of the Khalsa (Crownlands)."[79] Alivardi freed himself from Ghulam Mustafa Khan when the latter rebelled and was killed. And Alivardi finally stopped the Maratha invasions by ceding them Orissa in 1751.

In the final, peaceful five years of Alivardi's life, nothing happened to suggest that the bonds between the nazim and the zamindars had dissolved or turned to hostility. Rather, the zamindars were less dependent, less supervised, less integrated into the provincial administration. In the later decades of nawabi rule, it seems that zamindars no longer had to account for what they collected. The faujdars and the qanungos had ceased to provide the nazim with the military power and information they once had.[80] If the zamindars had identified with the nazim, they might have been grateful for their augmented autonomy. Yet during the 1757 conspiracies against Alivardi's successor, not a single major zamindar came to Siraj-ud-daula's defence. By 1757, the nazim's authority was unraveling, local administration had devolved to powerful zamindars, the provinces' finances were controlled by the Jagat Seth banking family, and the nazim's army was an unreliable, discontented force.

Apart from the size of their estates, what stands out about the zamindars of

[77] Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, pp. 330–31 and 340.
[78] Kalikinkar Datta, *Alivardi and his Times* (Calcutta, 1939), pp. 57–59.
[79] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, pp. 110–11. Also Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, p. 437.
[80] Akhtar, *Role of the Zamindars*, pp. 76–77.

Bengal, compared to similar landed elites elsewhere in India in this age of political flux and martial opportunism, was their military inactivity and political wariness. Bengal, whose deltaic terrain turned to mud in the monsoon, was not a horse-breeding region. Zamindars developed neither significant cavalry forces nor artillery and had become accustomed to non-Bengalis providing the region's fighting men. The most effective military forces operating in eighteenth-century Bengal were outsiders; Mughals, Afghans, Marathas, up-country mercenaries, and Europeans. Zamindari militia confined themselves largely to the tasks of guarding and escorting treasure, serving as display guards for rajas, and collecting revenue from reluctant villages.

3 Collecting rents and revenues

Accepting duties of rent collection from a raja-zamindar was a way to share in kingship. From the time an intermediary received betel and clothes from his raja's wardrobe, he began to participate in the noble condition of sovereignty. However modest his powers and income, he was now a patron to whom clients brought requests and expressed respect. He could use his discretion to distress or forgive the tenant in arrears. When he met dependent *jotdars* or fed guests at a wedding, his renters would be aware he stood on the multi-runged ladder of kingship. Best of all was transforming a temporary right to rents of an area into a perpetual holding to which he could retreat as the superior landholder rather than as someone else's employee. Henry Vansittart described the urge in 1766:

> When a man rises himself either by the army or finances – he is desirous of getting his native village and two or three about it, that he may keep his holydays in pomp with his family or if a foreigner, he covets an estate in land, that he may secure to himself a retreat of the time when fortune may cease to smile. He accordingly either purchases from a Zamindar, or gets a grant from the Nawab of five or six villages at a rent much below their real value.[1]

Whether a small cog in the rent-collecting hierarchy or the holder of several villages, an ambitious man typically sought a share of the rents in order to fulfill some aspects of a ruler's dharma, such as celebrating "his holydays in pomp."

Canonical Hindu discussions of statecraft stressed that the king needed wealth to fulfill his *rajadharma*. Without ample resources in his treasury, the raja could not carry out his most important duty: the protection of the people. Taxes in theory were thus primarily for the people's material and spiritual welfare and secondarily for rewarding the king for the protection he gave. At the same time, the Sanskrit texts warned against over-taxing the people for to do so might drive them to rebel. Yajnavalkya said "the fire springing from the wrath caused by the harassment of the subjects does not cease without burning

[1] Quoted in Akhtar, *Role of the Zamindars*, p. 24.

family, the wealth and the life of the king."[2] The king was counseled to husband the roots of his power by keeping his taxes moderate. Manu said the king should take "little by little," as the leech does from its host, the calf from the udder, and the bee from the flower.[3] The tigress carried her cubs between her teeth and the rat gnawed at a sleeping man's feet without causing injury, and so should the king levy taxes.[4]

Traditional Hindu authorities expected kings to draw income from agricultural produce, tolls and duties, and judicial fines, and of these agricultural produce was presumably most important. The usual share of the crops the king was allowed to take was one sixth, according to a variety of sources.[5] Whether or not this limit once had practical effects, the Mughal and Company states, and the rajas who served them, were not constrained by it. In the middle and late decades of the eighteenth century, ruling groups in Bengal took much more than one sixth of the crops. They seemed unmindful of the Santiparva's warning that "as a person desirous of milk never obtains any by cutting off the udders of a cow, similarly a kingdom afflicted by improper means, never yields any profit to the king."[6] While high rates of taxation did not ignite "the fire of wrath" among the people of Bengal, over-taxation was a factor in the decline of the nizamat, the persistent revenue arrears, and the economic deterioration which was widely assumed to have occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. It also imposed strains on the ethic of dependency that gave legitimacy to the agrarian hierarchies in Bengal's little kingdoms.

Of all exchanges of resources, the most sizeable were those payments derived from agriculture that were destined for the government. In most months of the year, the superior *raiyats* paid a *kist* (installment) to the officers appointed to receive the village obligations. If the raiyat held a *patta* (written agreement or lease) and if he could read, he would have known from the itemized list of his dues that a major portion of his payment was for a distant, hazy entity called the *badshah* (emperor), nazim, or the Company. However, he was more likely to be certain that much of his personal portion of his payment would never reach the government. The Mughal and Company governments determined the demand on each zamindar but the zamindar's subordinates had the discretionary authority to distribute the demand among individuals in the villages and make a profit or subsistence for themselves. These subordinates could increase or lower the demand on any raiyat, without fear of interference by the state, as long

2 Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmasastra (Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law)*, (3 vols., Poona, 1930–46), vol. III, p. 187.
3 Ibid., p. 185.
4 Ibid., p. 186.
5 Ibid., pp. 185 and 190.
6 *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, tr. Pratap Chandra Roy, vol. VII (Calcutta, n.d.), p. 168.

as the state's demand was met. They added to the *malguzari* (land revenue payments) charges for the most routine administrative, economic, religious, and social transactions. In fact, they altered individual obligations with such frequency and with so little pattern or consistency of rates that one of the wisest and best-informed students of revenue matters was moved to write that "of all subjects relating to the revenues," the variability was "the most difficult to explain."[7]

The zamindari subordinates' discretionary ability to alter the demand was in part a necessary feature of a landscape subject to flooding, shifts in river courses, extreme variations in rainfall, fluctuations in prices of individual crops, and frequent expansions and contractions of areas under cultivation. However, many shifts in the amounts individuals were required to pay were the result of cultural preferences. A major benefit of holding office in a patrimonial system of clientage was to be able to discriminate between one's closest or most sanctified dependents and the rest of the subject revenue payers. It is at least conceivable that the frequency with which people added or subtracted imposts on their dependents was functionally a means of renewing authority, of keeping authority active and alive, of emphasizing the discretionary and personal nature of authority. More certainly, employment of power to benefit one's relatives, servants, and other clients was a moral obligation from the Mughal emperor down through the official ranks.

A host of factors had determined the traditional variations: the number and type of crops grown, the fertility of the soil, the proximity to markets, and the social status or the office of the payer. Judging from eighteenth-century evidence, some cultivators were charged a fixed amount per plough, some had their fields measured; some paid zamindari agents in kind, most paid in cash; a few paid the same amount each year, most did not. But whatever the mixture of local practice, whatever principles governed the distribution of obligations, zamindars had enjoyed the discretion to allocate the demand in unequal portions that discriminated between people of high rank or usefulness and the rest of the population. And until Murshid Quli Khan's time, the long-term stability of the state's demand in Bengal meant that in theory at least zamindars had no apparent general need to increase the demand on their subjects except when assessing them for ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals. We may suppose that the notable degree of arbitrariness, exaction, and contention observable in the second half of the eighteenth century was a direct consequence of the rapid rise in the state's demand in the middle decades of the century. This chapter describes how the revenue was collected and how discretionary power operated in the distribution of obligations. The closely related subject of coercion in revenue collection is the topic of the following chapter.

7 John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 221.

Puniya

The timing of the payments was tied to the cycle of peasant growing activity. The revenue year began on the Bengali new year's day – the first day of Baisakh (April–May). Baisakh was the month in which the *aus* or quick-growing summer rice crop was planted in the paddy fields in high, dry, and sandy areas. The slower, more productive *aman* rice was also sown, either in nursery seed beds or the lower, richer soils, in Baisakh or in Jaistha (May–June).

The state formally inaugurated the revenue year with an official ceremony, in some years on the first day of Baisakh but sometimes later and always at or near the beginning of the main planting season before the monsoon rains settled in. On the appointed day, the principal zamindars, revenue farmers, and amils (government collectors) of Bengal converged on Murshidabad. They travelled in state,[8] by palanquin, by swiftly rowed boats, or, if authorized, by elephant. They were accompanied by their major *mutasaddis* (accountants) and armed escorts. They were expected to bring the final monthly kist to which they had agreed when they had visited the capital twelve months earlier. And they were to enter an agreement for the new year's jama (revenue assessment).

The nazim received the dignitaries in his *darbar* (assembly hall), seated under a canopy on his *masnad* (cushion-throne), leaning against a bolster. The canopy, *masnad,* and bolster were richly embroidered with gold. In front of him was the gold-embossed account book for registering payments and arrears. The bags of treasure holding the final kist were placed before the nazim. The zamindars and other officers, who numbered over 400 at one such ceremony in Alivardi's time,[9] were probably introduced as at other darbars by the public announcer or chief mace bearer who called out the title of people of first rank but used a different form of introduction for persons of second and third rank who made a "profound bow."[10] Each revenue payer presented a nazr (an offering or present made to a superior) of gold coins for the nazim and his officers. The nazim, in turn, gave each zamindar a khilat (honorary dress) which consisted of a gown, a girdle, and a turban.[11] The fineness of the material and the elegance of the embroidery varied according to the rank of the recipient.[12]

The annual gathering of the zamindars and other revenue collectors of Bengal is thought to have been an innovation of Murshid Quli Khan in the early years

[8] Although perhaps not in Murshid Quli Khan's time. He was said to have "prohibited all zemindars and Hindoos from riding in palkees, and allowed use only of straight bamboos for their chowpalehs [a meaner kind of palanquin]." [Salim Allah], *A Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal,* tr. Francis Gladwin (Calcutta, 1788), p. 57.

[9] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang,* in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs,* p. 154.

[10] Khan, *Seir,* vol. II, p. 200.

[11] This was also known as a *siropa* (literally, head to foot).

[12] Khan, *Seir,* vol. I, p. 15.

of the eighteenth century.[13] Mughal and English officers in Bengal referred to this ceremonial occasion by the term punya or puniya (holy day), which has strong Hindu connotations and a Sanskrit origin. *Punyaha* means "virtue, moral merit, holiness" in Bengali, Hindi, and Marathi.[14] Although the Mughals seem not to have held a puniya prior to Murshid Quli Khan's reign for the closing of one year's accounts and the opening of the next, among the many auspicious objects and occasions the term puniya was applied to was the Hindu new year's day when merchants and shopkeepers in Bengal settled their accounts by discharging their debts, collecting what was owed to them, and performing pujas to the appropriate deity, accompanied by "cakes, sweetmeats, fruits, and music."[15] Conjoining the celebrations that marked the turn of the Hindu agricultural and fiscal years was ancient. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* described an auditing occasion similar to the puniya: "All officers should assemble ... at the end of the hot season, with sealed accounts and with balances to be paid in the treasury. They are confined and forbidden to speak to each other. Fines are prescribed for those coming late or without their account books."[16] What was new in this increasingly commercial age was the Mughal blending of an assemblage of Bengal's zamindars with an ancient "Hindu revenue usage."[17] Mughals in Bengal and elsewhere mixed many non-Indian practices with Hindu customs.[18]

The puniya was an annual affirmation of authority and of the obligation to pay one's superior a share of agricultural income. The puniya ceremony brought dependents in the revenue system face to face with their superior. This was appropriate in a political system that gained legitimacy by converting every power relationship, however bureaucratic, into a personal one. By going to Murshidabad in person, the zamindar made a gesture of submission. And the nazim demonstrated his power to honor and recognize the zamindar who fulfilled the duties of his office and to punish the zamindar who failed. The eating of sweets symbolized the community of the assembled zamindars with the sovereign, while the distribution of khilats, appropriate to each rank, confirmed the hierarchy within that community. The puniya expressed the self-conscious stratification and unity of the Mughal social order.

[13] Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 90.

[14] H.H. Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms, and of Useful Words Occurring in Official Documents Relating to the Administration of the Government of British India* (2nd edn., Delhi, 1968), p. 681.

[15] Joguth Chunder Gangooly, *Life and Religion of the Hindoos with a Sketch of my Life and Experience* (Boston, MA, 1860), p. 93.

[16] J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago, IL, 1985), p. 132.

[17] Sarkar, *Mughal Administration*, p. 6.

[18] For other examples, see C.A. Bayly, "The Pre-History of 'Communalism'? Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Aprii 1985).

Murshid Quli Khan may have been imitating a traditional practice of the zamindars he had observed in the *mofussil* (the countryside as distinct from the headquarters), for the zamindars also held a puniya for their dependents and continued to do so for more than a century after the British abolished the puniya at the capital in 1772. Murshid Quli's desire to rule rural Bengal through the zamindars, while diminishing the role of the imperial mansabdars, may have enabled him to see the advantages of combining revenue collection with a ceremony familiar to the mostly Hindu zamindars. It is also conceivable that the banking house of Fatehchand, who received the title of Jagat Seth in 1723,[19] suggested the puniya to Murshid Quli, considering the importance of the puniya among commercial groups. What is certain is that when a zamindar was unable to pay off his arrears at the puniya, the Seths and other bankers were present to loan him money and to act as security for future payments.[20] We may speculate that Murshid Quli introduced the puniya at Murshidabad to restore obedience and ordered hierarchy to a society disturbed by the rebelliousness of the mansabdars in the twilight of Mughal imperial greatness and that the adaptation of a money-lenders' ceremony was an indication of the growing commercialization and interdependence of bankers and government in Bengal.

Zamindars approaching Murshidabad for the puniya may have experienced either a mood of fellowship or a sense of anxiety, depending on whether they were in arrears or not and what they anticipated for the coming year. Beginning with Murshid Quli, excuses for arrears were more often rejected, collections more closely approximated the demand, and occasionally abwabs (additional demands) were added to the existing jama. Arriving in Murshidabad in arrears was a special source of discomfort, regardless of whether they resulted from poor harvests, lax management, uncooperative subordinates, or over-assessment. When in arrears, a zamindar and his officers used all the diplomatic arts at their command in adjusting their accounts. A zamindar in arrears might negotiate with the nazim's officers an agreement for a temporary or permanent remission based upon pleas of drought or flood and future good faith. Persuading the officers required presents as well as arguments. If a zamindar failed to bribe the scribes who kept the revenue accounts, they might overstate the amount owed to the exchequer.[21] If he could not turn the nazim's advisers in his favor, they might recommend against leniency. The presence of the bankers ready to guarantee payment of arrears was a mixed blessing because, according to a British source, in the early Company period they charged 10 percent per

[19] Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 99.

[20] On the role of bankers in revenue collection, see Ranajit Sen, "Indian Money-Lenders: the Sarrafs in Bengal in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century," *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 100, pt. 1 (Jan.-June 1981), pp. 59–72.

[21] Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 269.

month on their loans to the zamindars.[22] And if the landholder in arrears failed to gain indulgence from the bankers and the nazim's officers, imprisonment and dismissal from the estate were possible. Alexander Dow claimed that zamindars feigned poverty at the puniya and "have even been known to carry the farce so far, as to suffer a severe whipping before they would produce their money."[23]

Harsh though their treatment may have been at times, the major zamindars seem to have negotiated their way around arrears more often than not. Despite their frequent arrears, the largest zamindaris of the 1780s were the same ones which dominated western and central Bengal in the 1720s: Birbhum, Bishnupur, Burdwan, Dinajpur, Nadia, and Rajshahi. The environment was hazardous, many major zamindars were confined, all were temporarily displaced, but ultimately the system showed remarkable stability at the top from Murshid Quli's time until the Permanent Settlement.

After the Murshidabad puniya, zamindars returned to their estates, knowing what the coming year's jama would be, and held their own puniyas for their subordinate revenue payers, with the assistance of Brahmins. It is recorded that in 1771, when the Murshidabad puniya was held on 10 April, the raja of Burdwan consulted Brahmins and fixed 5 June for Burdwan's mofussil puniya and 25 June for his *sadr* (headquarters) puniya in Burdwan town.[24] Information about these ceremonies is scant but in large zamindaris, not only did the zamindar hold a sadr puniya, his subordinate landholders held mofussil ones. The *patnidars* of Burdwan, the principal intermediaries who held perpetual leases under the raja after about 1800, continued until the 1940s to attend the sadr puniya at Burdwan where they received sweets and food. At the mofussil puniya in the Chakdighi *patni* (estate) under Burdwan, each tenant presented the patnidar with a rupee coin, in addition to the final kist. The Chakdighi patnidar regarded these ceremonial offerings as a source of good luck and kept them wrapped in pieces of paper with the date written on them.[25] W.W. Hunter reported that in Burdwan and Hughli districts when "the tenants assemble at the zamindari court," by which he probably meant the patnidar's court, "to give his offering, and are treated in turn to a refreshment of sweet meats, the *mandal* [village headman] is first served, and gets a present of a cloth as a mark of respect."[26] An early nineteenth-century observer's account of a Hughli district puniya was summarized as follows:

22 Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan* (3 vols., London, 1812), vol. I, p. cxxiii. The *Risala-i-ziraat* stated the interest rate was 5 percent. Calkins, "Revenue Administration," p. 224.

23 Dow, *History*, vol. I, p. cxxiii.

24 COR Progs. of 1 June 1771, vol. I.

25 Interview with Mr. Singha-Ray of Chakdighi, Sec. of the British Indian Association, Calcutta, 3 March 1981.

26 William Wilson Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (20 vols., London 1875–77), vol. III, p. 318, and vol. IV, p. 65.

First, in each village of the estate, worship of Laksmi was performed by a village Brahman at the expense of the landlord. Then a male representative of the tenant family longest in residence in the village (the *puniya patra rayat*) paid his rent by handing silver rupees to the landlord's agent, who handed them in turn to the Brahman, who placed the coins ceremoniously in a special collection vessel. The other tenants followed suit. At the same time a new account book for the year was opened by the landlord's agent, after it had been ritually anointed with vermillion, tumeric, ghee, and sandalwood paste by the priest. Rent-collecting and accounting were thus drawn into the realm of ritual.[27]

Zamindari collection

After the puniya, how did the zamindars gather the revenue from their own territory? The only existing detailed descriptions of how the revenue was assessed and collected within zamindaris were written after British rule began. The best-known contemporary account is the Amini Commission's Report,[28] submitted by three English officials in 1778 after more than a year's work with the assistance of Gangagobind Sinha, an experienced revenue officer under the Company and brother of a diwan under the nazims. The commission sent Bengali *amins* (specially deputed officers) to the districts and collected three rooms' full of Bengali and Persian accounts and records. These they analyzed with the help of thirty clerks.[29] Another useful account, written a decade or so earlier and explicitly descriptive of pre-English revenue practice, is the *Risala-i-Ziraat* of which no English translation has been published. It was prepared for the East India Company by an author whose name was not preserved.[30] Neither account attempts to describe the many regional variations or changes in practice and nomenclature in revenue collection; both are probably reasonably accurate descriptions of the most common practices of the middle decades of the eighteenth century, both before and after the transition from Mughal to British rule, although they disagree on minor details.

What stands out in these two accounts is the degree to which the revenue-collecting pyramid was layered and staffed in its middle levels by temporary appointees. The temporariness of the positions and the elaborate record-keeping requirements at all levels theoretically gave the highest zamindari officers the ability to identify the source of shortages and defalcations and to remove the

27 Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, p. 47.

28 Published in Ramsbotham, *Studies*, pp. 99–134.

29 Ibid., pp. 77ff.

30 A rough translation appears as "Substance of a Treatise on the Revenues of Bengal, Translated from the Persian," in Mr. Murray's Papers on the Revenues of Bengal, Home Misc., vol. 68. The best summary is in Calkins, "Revenue Administration," chapter 6. It is also summarized by Z.U. Malik, "Agrarian Structure of Bengal at the Beginning of British Conquest," in [Aligarh Muslim University], *Medieval India: A Miscellany* (New York, 1977), pp. 177–202.

person responsible. The theory of complete information was offset by countervailing realities of localism in large zamindaris. Many villages were up to a day's walk from zamindari headquarters, many links in the revenue-collecting chain separated the zamindari diwan from the cultivator, and so enterprising were officers and dominant peasants in obscuring culpability that when a diwan investigated a shortfall in the collections, he often found it difficult to discover whether the cause was crop failure, peasant–local officer conspiracy, accountant embezzlement, or other factors.

The revenue passed through many hands before it reached the zamindar. A large zamindar, we know from other sources, rarely supervised revenue collection closely and in the Company period was usually ignorant of the details of revenue management.[31] The zamindari diwan, with his naibs (deputies), managed the collections and received the revenue from the mofussil. In large zamindaris, the top intermediaries were revenue farmers, called *kutkinadars* and *mustajirs,* who contracted to pay a fixed sum and profited from any excess collections that they could obtain from their subordinate payers.[32] Below the revenue farmers in large zamindaris were the *shiqdars*, who were the highest intermediaries in smaller zamindaris. Shiqdars managed the collections for "four or five" villages,[33] received a fixed fee which they deducted from the collections, and were temporary officers. A shiqdar, in turn, collected from *tarafdars*. A *taraf* consisted of one village or three or four *mauzas* (the smallest revenue unit, which in some cases was a small village).[34] A tarafdar also was a temporary officer with a fixed allowance. He collected from the chief raiyats. This elaborate hierarchy meant that between the time the revenue left the village and was deposited in the zamindar's treasury, it might pass through at least five offices: the tarafdar's, the shiqdar's, the kutkinadar's, the naib diwan's, and the diwan's. Since most of these officers were assisted by clerks, *gomashtas* (agents), *rasngirs* (land measurers), and/or foot soldiers, the number of people involved in collecting, counting, recording, and transmitting each village's installment was many more than five. Each office in the chain made deductions in the process, to pay for their staffs of clerks and gomashtas, their record-keeping expenses, and their own maintenance and profits. In addition, frequently money-lenders and *shroffs* (money-changers) were present to make loans, to count and weigh the payments, and to compute the shortages due to worn coinage, all for a commission.

[31] This view was nearly universal among eighteenth-century Company administrators. See John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, paras. 167–71.

[32] Ramsbotham, *Studies*, p. 109; Calkins, "Revenue Administration," p. 181.

[33] According to *Risala-i-ziraat*, Calkins, "Revenue Administration," p. 181.

[34] According to *Risala*. But according to Raja Rajaballabh, the *rairayan*, a tarafdar was "a collector of several villages." Calkins, "Revenue Administration," p. 196.

Neither the Amini Report nor the *Risala-i-ziraat* indicates how often the intermediaries were changed. However, the Amini Report states the shiqdar was temporary and both imply that the kutkinadar or mustajir was also.[35] We may infer that the relations between these intermediaries and their subordinate revenue payers, where temporary, lacked the affective patrimonial qualities associated with the zamindar himself.

Was the reliance on short-term appointees, rather than on hereditary local chiefs, an eighteenth-century innovation adopted by the huge zamindars who emerged under Murshid Quli Khan? Did the new zamindars imitate the more centralized and bureaucratic practices of the Mughals, in an effort to increase the efficiency of their collections in response to the pressure for higher revenue? Did they seek to forge fresh chains of loyalty through the distribution of patronage? We may surmise that this was so but evidence about pre-Murshid Quli practices is too thin to permit a conclusion. The intermediaries performed the extractive, bureaucratic work of the zamindari, sparing the raja from the unpopular, coercive aspects of land management. "It is the custom of those who are masters," wrote Jean Law after many years in Mughal Bengal, "to do nothing themselves. The smallest zamindar has his clerks through whom business must be transacted."[36] The zamindar was left to act as the chief source of beneficence and protector of his subjects against his subordinates' impositions, if he chose to respond to complaints.

Zamindari accounting required professional training which was begun in village schools and completed through experience in the kacharis. The Amini Report listed eighteen separate accounts kept by village-level record keepers, abstracts of which were sent upwards to the tarafdars, shiqdars, and kutkinadars. These accounts specified the raiyats' names, boundaries, crops, leases, revenue installments, payments, balances, etc.[37] The number of specific charges demanded of raiyats in a single Mughal jurisdiction in Mir Qasim's time could exceed 200.[38] The complexity of the accounts required that intermediaries or their naibs had advanced computational skills and this was one of the factors that insured that they were recruited from the literate high castes.

In contrast to the chain of intermediaries appointed by the zamindari officers and their temporary subordinates, the villagers involved in revenue collection were part of a more or less permanent, corporate community. Within the village, though, the peasants themselves were stratified. Most villages in western Bengal had an "oligarchy" of dominant peasants, often of one or two castes, typically Aguris, Kaibartas, or Sadgops, who controlled the use of the land and organized

[35] Ramsbotham, *Studies*, p. 109; Calkins, "Revenue Administration." p. 181.
[36] Memoir by Jean Law (1763), Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. III, p. 160.
[37] Ramsbotham, *Studies*, pp. 111–15.
[38] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 59.

agricultural production. These dominant peasants are today called jotdars.[39] They cultivated part of their land, often with the help of hired laborers, and, if their holdings were large enough, they rented out the balance, often on a half and half share-cropping basis. Frequently, the most influential of the dominant peasants was the mandal or *muqaddam* (village headman). He was selected by his fellow villagers and he represented the village to outside interests and in some villages settled disputes and collected the revenue. The *Risala-i-ziraat* said that the mandal was in charge of five or six households,[40] which probably meant that he collected from the five or six major peasant families who in turn sub-let to and hired a much larger group of cultivators. Another important villager was the *patwari*, who was sometimes the same person as the mandal. The patwari kept village revenue records and sometimes collected the revenue. Since his position required knowledge of accounting, we may guess that he was recruited from among literate families among the higher peasant castes or from Brahmin or Kayastha families, some of whom were cultivators. British officials usually assumed that the mandal and the patwari protected the villagers' interests more often than the zamindar's, although in the Mughal period patwaris may have been appointed by the qanungos (Mughal record keepers).

The mandal and other dominant peasants frequently enjoyed a privilege, in addition to holding most of the land, that was denied to their more numerous fellow villagers: they were permitted to cultivate more land than the land management records showed. When the patwari and the gomashta of the collection officer measured the lands of each peasant, they accepted a *salami* (present) "at the time of seizing the rope" used for measuring and then understated the area held.[41] This under-measurement was depicted in English accounts as a fraud perpetuated on the zamindar or the state. It was something more. It must have provided the dominant raiyats with a reserve for years with poor harvests. The high level of the state's demand provided little flexibility or margin for such occurrences. If John Shore was right in estimating that revenue collection under Company rule left peasants with only half their produce[42] and if cultivation costs approximated half the balance, then most peasants who sub-let from the dominant raiyats were perpetually close to the margin of subsistence. In a drought or flood year, the dominant raiyats had to indulge their sub-tenants with lower rents, loans, and/or postponement of debt repayment, or risk having them migrate or fall ill. Viewed in this light, the common practice of permitting the affluent raiyats to hold extra, hidden land should be seen as a

39 For an excellent discussion of the eighteenth-century "village oligarchies" of the jotdars, see Ray, *Change*, pp. 52–72.
40 Calkins, "Revenue Administration," p. 183.
41 Malik, "Agrarian Structure," pp. 181–82.
42 John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, paras. 109 and 145.

functional and necessary compromise to maintain labor supply, minimum nutrition, and the survival of the village community. The power of indulgence was no less vital to the working of village moral economy than it was to the operation of the zamindari as a whole.

British officials before 1800 did not comment often on relations between the jotdars and their sub-tenants yet when they did, they rarely wrote of jotdar indulgence. H.T. Colebrooke, in his measured, detailed account of Bengali agriculture written on the basis of his experiences as a civil servant in north Bengal in the 1790s, and while discussing bonded servitude and slavery, commented that "the relation of master and slave appears to impose the duty of protection and cherishment on the master, as much as that of fidelity and obedience on the slave, and their mutual conduct is marked with gentleness and indulgence on the one side, and with zeal and loyalty on the other."[43] The numerous sub-tenants of the dominant raiyats were less well treated, in Colebrooke's view. Perpetually in debt and "depressed by excessive rent in kind ... they cannot labour with spirit, while they earn a scanty subsistence without hope of bettering their situation."[44]

The dominant peasants in the last three decades of the century, and presumably throughout the century, acted collectively to protect their privileges. At the mofussil puniya, they argued as a body against enhancements and measurements which might have uncovered their hidden lands. They colluded with the intermediaries to have the demand lowered. One common practice was for the raiyats to obtain deductions at the start of the year on the pretext of a diminished area sown and then agree to a special clandestine fee at the end of the year which would not be entered into the intermediaries' records.[45] They also engaged in tumults, sent petitions, and descended in large bodies on the district headquarters or even Calcutta to protest against the behavior of local zamindari or Company employees. When these measures failed, groups and sometimes whole villages migrated to escape oppression. The identity of interests among the major jotdars in particular was sufficient to be a persistent source of corporate action in rural areas where most supra-village political behavior was organized around vertical patron–client ties.

Despite cooperative resistance of dominant jotdars to the exactions of zamindari appointees, and despite presumed acts of indulgence, village unity was limited by social and economic differentiation and segmentation. When powerful jotdars obtained lower rents or unrecorded lands without a corresponding reduction in the village's total assessment, others in the village might be

43 Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 80.
44 Ibid., p. 42.
45 Ranajit Sinha (pub.), *Maharaja Debi Sinha* (Calcutta, 1914), pp. 485–86.

assessed to make up the difference. Resentment of privileges may have been tempered by a culturally conditioned expectation of differential rates of assessments or by fellow-feeling when the caste of the privileged jotdars and their sub-tenants was the same. But village solidarity was attenuated and frequently met its limits in the structural divide between the clean castes and the degraded *jal-achal* castes (from whom Brahmins will not accept water), such as Bagdis and Bauris, who supplied most of the hired labor, lived in semi-detached hamlets, formed separate worship groups without the service of respectable Brahmins, and had distant relations with most middle and high caste people. In northwest Bengal at the turn of the century, and perhaps elsewhere, almost half the cultivators were landless laborers.[46]

Nawabi abwabs

The main variability in the revenue system came not from preferential arrangements given to individual favorites, as common as that was. Rather, special cesses or imposts, called abwabs, taken proportionally from all revenue payers in each zamindari, were the more common source of instability in the revenue demand. The accounts kept in the capital, in the zamindari kachari, and in each village distinguished between the *asal jama* ("original" demand) and the abwabs. The asal jama was a relatively stable amount and was theoretically connected in some way to Todar Mal's land settlement of the 1580s or to some subsequent Mughal settlement.[47] In fact, in the Company period the abwabs had no general proportional relation to what was called the asal jama because in most areas some abwabs had been consolidated into the asal jama figure so that the figure was no longer asal or original.[48] In one area that total demand might consist of one part asal jama and five parts abwabs while in another the proportions might be reversed.

The great growth in the state's revenue demand in the eighteenth century took place under the heading of abwabs. Abwabs continued into the nineteenth century as the largest source of variation in what a zamindar demanded from his tenants. James Grant, in his treatise on revenue, blamed the later nazims for deviating from the ideal, systematic Mughal principles of revenue assessment, by making increases by adding proportional abwabs onto an older assessment instead of measuring cultivated land to form an accurate, current assessment.

46 Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India*, vol. II (London, 1838), pp. 686 and 912.

47 Amini Commission Report, Ramsbotham, *Studies*, p. 110.

48 See John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para 397, and Narendra Krishna Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal from Plassey to the Permanent Settlement* (3 vols., Calcutta, 1956–62), vol. II, p. 207.

What Grant's argument minimized was that landholders had always levied temporary cesses on their subjects to pay for special needs, such as wars, weddings, and funerals, and that Bengal had never been systematically measured. But Grant's main point stands: the abwabs levied by the later nazims (and continued by the British) were arbitrary in the sense that they were rarely based on a detailed survey of the current state of cultivation.[49] Their magnitude and arbitrariness seems to have provoked conflict and instability in the whole pattern of zamindari relationships, and that accounts as much as any other factor for the British perception that revenue obligations with the zamindari system lacked regularity, fairness, and rationality.

Each of the abwabs levied on the zamindars by the eighteenth-century nazims had a specific justification even though the actual motivation in any given case may have been simply to increase the state's revenue. The stated purposes of the dozen classes of abwabs added from Murshid Quli Khan to Qasim Ali ranged from cesses on new zamindari profits (*kaifiyat*) resulting from extension of cultivation and surplus collections, to cesses to pay the Maratha *chauth*, to cesses to pay for gifts to the emperor on Islamic festivals, to build a mansion for Alivardi's grandson (Siraj-ud-daula), and to compensate the state for the short-weight of used coins. Some abwabs were distributed more or less evenly throughout the province, as pro-rated increases on the former demand, while others, such as *kaifiyat*, were confined to particular territories.[50] As we have seen, the abwabs almost doubled the state's land revenue demands, from Rs. 1.31 krors to Rs. 2.56 krors between 1700 and 1763. In most years, neither the nazims nor the Company in the early years of British rule succeeded in collecting anything close to the full assessment. The Company's Permanent Settlement of 1793 fixed the land revenue demand at Rs. 2.68 krors, of which almost Rs. 2.20 krors was for Bengal proper, without Bihar and Orissa.[51]

Zamindari abwabs

After nawabi abwabs were added to the demand on the zamindars, the zamindars naturally passed on the new obligations in their engagements with their subordinates. Since accounting practices differed from those of the provincial government, as well as among themselves, only some of the nawabi abwabs showed up in zamindari mofussil accounts. Moreover, zamindars levied a whole different class of imposts. Zamindari abwabs, in contract to the nawabi abwabs, were usually temporary and were ostensibly for a purpose related to the particular circumstances of the zamindar. When a zamindar had a marriage, funeral,

49 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 205ff.
50 Ibid.
51 Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.2, p. 141.

pilgrimage, or other ritual occasion to observe, or debts to discharge, he added temporary abwabs.[52] In some years, the number of such abwabs mentioned on one person's account ran into the dozens. The antiquity, range, and purpose of these local cesses may be gauged by Aurangzib's *farmans* (imperial decrees) of 1665 and 1673 banning unauthorized abwabs levied by zamindars and mansabdars. Jadunath Sarkar grouped these banned abwabs into six categories. It is notable that the categories included imposts on almost every group in the population, including revenue-free landholders, and that all but the sixth matched the abwabs listed in British government records in the nineteenth century, long after the Company banned them:

1. "Duties on the local sale of produce," such as fish, milk and curds, clay pots, and cow-dung cakes.
2. "Fee on the sale of immoveable property," such as land, houses, and trees.
3. "Perquisites exacted" by officials, such as collectors of arrears or land measurers, for their own or the state's benefit.
4. "License-tax for plying certain trades," such as "carting, animal slaughtering, cloth printing, thatching, vegetable selling, and cutting grass or wood in the jungle."
5. "Forced subscriptions" of gifts or unpaid labor to visiting officials and other dignitaries such as zamindars and religious preceptors.
6. "Special imposts on Hindus."[53]

The multiplicity of abwabs implies that authority required repeated affirmation and that it could not be reconfirmed without at least a symbolic payment to its holder.

The variability of the zamindar's collections from year to year was rooted both in the material conditions of agriculture and in Bengali cultural preferences. The fickleness of the weather produced a highly unstable income while the state demanded a revenue with few downward variations before 1790 and none after 1790. Those poor peasants who paid a share of their harvest in kind were less vulnerable to price fluctuations than the dominant raiyats and the intermediaries above them who paid rents in cash. Although Bengal experienced fewer famines than most parts of India, its crop prices fluctuated widely. H.T. Colebrooke wrote about rice that "when the crops of corn are very abundant, it is not only cheap, but wants a real market ... Without famine or scarcity we have known corn four times dearer at the first hand one year than in preceding."[54] If a jotdar found himself without sufficient income to pay the zamindar's demand, he had three options short of disobedience or migration: he could pay the current demand from his savings if he had any, he could borrow

[52] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, paras. 437–40.
[53] Sarkar, *Mughal Administration*, pp. 77–90.
[54] Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 67.

from his superior or another lender, or he could seek the zamindari agent's indulgence in the form of a reduction or postponement of the demand. Given that rental demands left many raiyats with little more than a subsistence, that raiyats were generally indebted, and that zamindars went to prison or surrendered land while claiming deficiencies, it seems certain that zamindari officers often had to choose whether to indulge or coerce individual raiyats. What the Collector of Midnapur said in 1821 about that district was probably true of most of the province: "it has been customary throughout this District for the Landholders on settling their accounts at the end of the year to make abatements on account of Calamities of Season."[55] When they lowered the demand in one part of their territory, they often tried to bring their aggregate collections up to the level of the government's demand by imposing abwabs on the raiyats in the less affected areas.[56]

Statistically, the smaller the unit of collection, the greater was the probability of wide fluctuation. The government of Bengal fixed its demand in relation to the mean annual production for the whole province but the harvest and price of crops in any particular village or pargana were likely to deviate from the mean by a significant amount at least occasionally. To take an extreme case, the Boonun pargana in Nadia had a jama of Rs. 91,211 in 1776-77 which, due to crop failure and population loss, was reduced to Rs. 55,001 in 1788-89. However, natural calamities in 1788-89 reduced the actual receipts to Rs. 28,000.[57] A zamindar in possession of such a decayed pargana would look to his other parganas – and abwabs – to compensate for the deficiency.

Most abwabs in the Company period were not labeled or conceived as meeting the state's demands but were instead intended for the special expenses of zamindars, their officers, or village communities. The marriage of a zamindar was the occasion for one of the largest abwabs, called a *mangun*. Mangun literally means begging or request and it was imposed for a major life-cycle ceremony in the zamindar's family, including marriages, the birth of a son or daughter, or *shraddhas* (death ceremonies).[58] It was also an abwab which villagers expected to pay. When Raja Tilakchandra of Burdwan was married in 1749, the raiyats paid a mangun of Rs. 1,18,718 or an addition of roughly 4 percent on the usual zamindari jama. The Burdwan Provincial Council commented that Raja Tilakchandra's marriage mangun "appears to have been a voluntary contribution from the Inhabitants in support of the credit and dignity of their natural Zamindar."[59] The mangun probably was "voluntary" in the sense

[55] E.R. Barwell, Midnapur Col., to BOR, 7 Sept. 1821, BOR Prog. 35 of 12 Aug. 1822, vol. 643.
[56] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 237.
[57] Ibid., paras. 502–03.
[58] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, pp. 135–36.
[59] Burdwan PCOR to GG, 1 Nov. 1775, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 1 Nov. 1775, vol. II.

of "without objection" rather than that of "being volunteered." It is easy to see why raiyats might have been willing to pay the mangun. If they believed, as many villagers did, that they belonged to a hierarchical community headed by the raja, they may have expected to benefit from their raja's ritual and consequent good fortune. Part or all of the mangun was returned to the community in the form of sweets, a communal feast, presents to Brahmins and other important people, and a spectacle to enjoy. Similar reasoning may also have worked in the Durga, Rath, and other public pujas for which abwabs, in cash and kind, were commonly taken. The zamindar of Mysadul in Midnapur in the 1870s described the Rs. 4,000–4,500 expenditure on the Rath festival, which his family had started performing long before 1790, as "incurred in feeding the ryots and poor and helpless persons; all the ryots attend the festival, and themselves pull the car from religious motives."[60]

Another occasional zamindari abwab was to help the zamindar when he was in difficulty. This was also called a mangun or sometimes a *bhikhya*. The most common kind of difficulty was falling into arrears to government or in debt to bankers. How dependents felt about that abwab must have been affected by how the zamindar's need originated. Natural disaster may have generated more willingness to pay than a raja's profligacy or embezzlement by his *amla* (officers). In deciding whether to protest or refuse payment of abwabs, fear of an unknown, new zamindar and the arrival of new amla and intermediate tenure-holders often outweighed the hardship of a temporary abwab.

Privileged villagers who enjoyed unauthorized rent-free plots, concessionary rental rates, or the positions of headman or gomashta were likely to urge fellow villagers to accept unpopular abwabs. The uncertainties of new management threatened their positions, their privileges. The Collector of Burdwan wrote in 1820 that the village headman, who generally held hidden unassessed land, dictated to the other raiyats what to do when new demands were made upon them. "Whatever they dictate the Ryots will agree to without a murmur of objection whether it be to resist paying a cowry of rent or to encrease it or whether for every Ryot to present a Nuzzur to the Talookdar or that they should turn out in a body and drive him and his Gomastah out of the village."[61]

Another category of abwab-like payments emphasized the zamindar's social dominance as *bhuswami* or lord of the soil and his responsibility for upholding

[60] C.T. Buckland, Com. of Burdwan Div., to GOB, Jud. Dept., 27 March 1873, Papers Regarding the Collection of Illegal Cesses in Bengal, *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal*, no. XLVI (Calcutta, 1873), p. 208. This source is hereafter cited as "Papers Regarding Illegal Cesses."

[61] J.E. Elliott, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 22 Feb. 1820, BOR Prog. 15 of 14 March 1820, vol. 607.

proper behavior. These were fines on the occasion of villagers' marriages and other life-cycle ceremonies, as well as on a violation of sanctioned standards of conduct. These fines were not of much economic importance to the zamindar[62] but were symbols of his mastership over his *prajas* or subjects. The most common such fine, according to a nineteenth-century inquiry into abwabs, was the marriage abwab (*marucha* or *bie-dan*) which ranged from a few *annas* to several rupees, depending on the status of the family. The zamindar of Mysadul justified the marriage fee in the 1870s in these words: "according to the Hindoo Shastra no one celebrates the marriage ceremony of his son and daughter without paying something in the shape of *pronamee* (money paid out of respect)."[63] Similarly, when brothers separated their households, usually after the death of their father, an abwab was demanded. Fines were also levied on barbers, midwives, *dhobis* (clothes washers) and other occupational groups for the privilege of serving a village. After a person was outcasted for transgressing behavioral norms, reinstatement often required payment of a fine to the zamindar. Fornication with a widow and a prohibited inter-jati marriage were examples.[64] And when villagers brought disputes or criminal complaints to a zamindari court, they were fined. Many preferred this to the expensive and lengthier procedures of the government courts.[65] In some zamindaris, tenants paid salami (presents) to the zamindar for the privilege of using status emblems such as palanquins, umbrellas, and shoes.[66]

Other impositions taken by almost all zamindars in Bengal in the 1870s, eight decades after they were declared illegal, were payments for the zamindar's contribution to moving the *dak* (mail) through his estate; *batta* or *oozun* (compensation for worn, light, depreciated coins paid as rent);[67] a fee equaling 25 to 100 percent of a tenant's annual rent when there was a change in the tenant's name registered in the zamindari records; and a nazr to show respect when an absentee landholder visited his estate. *Begar* or forced labor was often

[62] In 1761–2, the Burdwan zamindari accounts show an estimated income of Rs. 50,000 under the heading of *Bazi* (miscellaneous) *Jama* for fines and forfeitures. This equaled about 1.6 percent of the zamindari's total jama. Gokhal Majumdar's Estimate of Burdwan Revenues, 1761–2, Committee of New Lands, Accounts Received, 1761, Range 98, vol. 10.

[63] List and analysis of Midnapur cesses submitted by L. Harrison, Midnapur Col., enclosure to C.T. Buckland, letter of 27 March 1873.

[64] H.A. Cockerell, Offg. Com. of Presidency Div., to GOB, Rev. Dept., 5 July 1872, Papers Regarding Illegal Cesses.

[65] E.W. Molony, Com. of Rajshahi Div., to GOB, Rev. Dept., 19 April 1872, ibid.

[66] Sirajul Islam, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal: A Study of its Operation, 1790–1819* (Dacca, 1979), p. 225.

[67] Zamindars could gain or lose in converting currency into a form which the government would accept. In 1800, Burdwan zamindars were losing 3-4 percent to *poddars* who changed the six kinds of rupees in circulation into acceptable currency. Y. Burges, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 9 Jan. 1800 *BLI*, p. 411.

required as well. This is by no means a full list but rather some of the most common zamindari imposts.[68]

Village abwabs

A further category of cesses reinforces the notion that villagers may have frequently understood abwabs to serve a corporate purpose. These were *gram mathuts* (village cesses). Gram mathuts included demands imposed by village leaders on their fellow inhabitants, usually for the benefit of the community. Their character is revealed in a 1789 report about a village called Jyrambatty from a Company officer assigned to Bishnupur. The village's jama was Rs. 693 and the mathuts consisted of fifty-one items amounting to an additional Rs. 60. The mathuts were designated for a broad range of economic, political, charitable, and ritual purposes. Two of the items were for the expenses of raiyats and Bydenaut Mundull while at Indas, the administrative headquarters of Bishnupur. Presumably a delegation of Jyrambatty raiyats and the village mandal had gone in deputation to Indas to plead for a lower revenue assessment or against the oppression of a local official. Perhaps it was a year of drought in Jyrambatty, for one cess was paid to an amin for permission to drain the tanks (possibly for irrigation), another was for coolie hire, a third for tank repair.[69] Or perhaps the village leaders had decided to improve the reservoir capacity of the village's tanks.

Another group of cesses given that year in Jyrambatty went to notable individuals. These payments included nazrs or presents to a new gosain (mendicant), a young raja, and the caretaker of a temple or shrine; faujdari salami or a present to the police; and fish for one Ramnarain and one Pancharam Nundy. Certain cesses were for services performed for the village, including wages for the *poddars* or money-changers who may have counted and sorted the variety of coinages in which the village paid its revenue, payments to a *ghatwal* (guard) and a *mali* (florist), and payments for the tank repairs mentioned above. Other cesses were for charitable-type distributions to *faqirs* and a *bairagi* (mendicant), to "trembling girls," and to the shraddha of one Golamy Doss.[70] The cess for "trembling girls" might have been for a village entertainment but more likely it was to engage a healing or ritual specialist to try to overcome a nervous disorder or spirit possession. Golamy Doss' shraddh was paid for by the villagers, perhaps because the deceased left no family to pay for the ceremony. The

[68] H.A. Cockerell, letter of 5 July 1872.

[69] A. Hesilrige, Asst. on deputation at Bishnupur, to C. Keating, Birbhum Col., 22 Oct. 1789, BOR, Misc., Prog., 1–18 March 1790, vol. 86.

[70] Ibid.

villagers may have worried that Golamy Doss' spirit would bother them without the proper rituals or they may have felt a communal responsibility to ensure that the obligations of dharma were fulfilled, to keep up the village's *sattvagun* (that which inspires virtue).[71]

Payments to intermediaries

The final set of payments taken from village revenue payers were the fees and abwabs paid to the intermediaries in the collection hierarchy. We saw that ijaradars, kutkinadars, shiqdars, and tarafdars each were permitted to deduct from the village collections sums for the wages and expenses of their naibs (deputies), writers, vakils (legal practitioners), and peons. John Shore estimated in 1789 that the cost of collections from the zamindar downwards equaled 15 percent of the government's net demand and that the profits of the intermediaries between the raiyats and the government amounted to an additional 35 percent.[72] This meant that roughly a third of what raiyats paid went into the hands of the zamindars and their subordinate collectors.

Some zamindari servants, including the village watchmen, received land assignments in lieu of salaries[73] but most seem to have been salaried, with allowances authorized for their expenses. The salaries of many zamindari and intermediaries' servants were so low that they often imposed unauthorized demands of their own upon the villagers. The practice was so widespread that there seems to have been an implicit understanding that naibs, amins, gomashtas, etc., would supplement their salaries. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Burdwan and elsewhere, naibs responsible for collecting tens of thousands of rupees each year received monthly salaries of Rs. 6–20.[74] Often their real income was greater by far. A collector in Jessore district reported that a landholder with a jama of Rs. 14,599 replaced his naib every six months or so, on a monthly salary of Rs. 20, and that each new naib paid Rs. 2–3,000 salami for the appointment.[75] The general custom was for a naib or his subordinates on tour to charge villagers both for their maintenance and for the revenue transactions they performed. In Burdwan in 1872, presents required included a patta salami when a tenant's lease was signed; a present to the clerk who wrote a rent receipt; presents at the annual puniya when accounts were audited; and a

[71] See M. Davis, *Rank and Rivalry*, pp. 142–43, on villagers' reaction to the failure of a family to perform shraddh.

[72] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 109.

[73] Minute by John Sumner on the Method of Revenue Collections, 10 Dec. 1765, M.E. Monckton Jones, *Warren Hastings in Bengal, 1772–1774* (Oxford, 1918), p. 71.

[74] See career histories of applicants for the positions of qanungo. BOR Prog. 18 of 10 Aug. 1819, vol. 599.

[75] C. Tucker, Jessore Col., to BOR, 18 Dec. 1819, Prog. 10 of 21 Jan. 1820, BOR, vol. 605.

present when a well, tank, or tree was consecrated.[76] Similar payments were required when land management officers came to a village to collect arrears, settle disputes, or measure fields. In short, the employees of zamindars and of their intermediaries lived off the land and their descent on a village was therefore an unwelcome occasion for villagers who had to maintain and gratify them.

The indeterminancy of the gratuities, abwabs, and the land revenue demand had a revealing parallel in the matter of military pay under the nazims. Infantry and cavalry were recruited with the promise of a monthly salary and the expectation of extra donations or "prize-money" and opportunities to pillage after victories in battle. Yet at least from Alivardi's time, soldiers serving the nazim were kept in arrears, sometimes for over a year at a time. The motive at times was to discourage soldiers from deserting. The effect was to undermine discipline and convert the start of military campaigns into a confrontation between importunate soldiers and their commanders for payment of back and future wages and promises of prize-money. On occasion, the negotiations determined whether near-mutinous troops would attack their commander or the enemy. As with revenue collection, the uncertainty and inherent need for negotiation seemed to be a method to maintain control and reassert personal authority.[77]

Conclusion

From the start of Company rule, British officials tried to impose greater order and regularity on the collection of revenue from zamindari dependents. Through several decades of experimentation and gathering information, they tried to stabilize the state's demand on the zamindars so that the demand would be predictable, known. They expected the zamindars to do the same for their subordinates. They issued numerous regulations instructing zamindars about what they could and could not collect, prescribing the form of pattas (written agreements) each superior raiyat was to receive, and encouraging the use of standardized rates of assessment.

A series of factors frustrated these orders. By the mid-eighteenth century, zamindari abwabs had become, if they had not always been, much more than a way of paying for a zamindar's rituals and occasional debts. They were rather a necessary means of bringing zamindari income up to the level of the state's revenue demand, a universal feature of land management. Hard-pressed reve-

[76] T.B. Lane, Offg. Com., Burdwan, to GOB, Jud. Dept., 1 Oct. 1872, Papers Regarding Illegal Cesses, p. 205.

[77] See Datta, *Alivardi*, pp. 121 and 145; Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, p. 272; Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. I. p. 265; and Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments*, pp. 417–19.

nue payers clung to the hopes that abwabs were temporary, that government officers or landholders would realize that the demand was impossibly high. Most raiyats balked at accepting pattas, fearing that to do so would be tantamount to agreeing to the permanency of the abwabs. Zamindari servants found that raiyats could be compelled to pay a particular abwab for only a few years and they then removed them and added new ones, on different pretexts. In that way, the demand on most raiyats was in constant flux and raiyats did not know what their continuing obligations were.[78]

Company officials sought to escape from the cyclical struggle by ordering the consolidation of reasonable abwabs into a single demand and elimination of unauthorized abwabs. The Committee of Revenue, recognizing that zamindari accounting practices varied from village to village, considered "local scrutiny" in 1776 but, realizing it would take at least two or three years, decided against it. Instead, it advocated banning only certain abwabs, which it imagined had been added since 1768-69, since the government's demand had stabilized. These included abwabs for the repair of river embankments, village police, short weight of coins paid by raiyats, and mangun (ceremonial costs).[79]

Zamindars continued to levy abwabs without regard to government regulations; most raiyats still refused to accept pattas. The East India Company pressed its revenue demands more efficiently than most of its Mughal predecessors and compelled landholders, in effect, to employ all the collecting methods at their disposal.

Abwabs were often the vehicle for these increases. Because many abwabs were occasional, they gave zamindars a flexibility that the more permanent jama did not offer. For example, after the famine of 1769-70 killed off as much as a third of the population in some districts and left deserted perhaps 18 percent of Bengal's cultivated land,[80] zamindars raised the rent of the surviving cultivators to compensate for the loss of their fellow villagers and to meet the Company's virtually unadjusted, undiminished revenue demand.

Another situation in which new abwabs were likely to be added on to the usual rental was following the turnover of zamindars and their intermediaries. Two periods of Company rule were notable for such turnovers: the 1770s and the 1790s. In the 1770s, Warren Hastings' administration auctioned off revenue-collecting rights to ijaradars (revenue farmers) for five years. Ijaradars often found that the rental assets of the villages they farmed were underrated, as a result of collusive record falsification, and fell into arrears. Moreover, as their leases approached expiration, the money-lenders and bankers refused, unless

78 John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, paras. 220, 241, 408–41.
79 COR to GG, 28 June 1776, Burdwan PCOR, vol. 15.
80 Kumar and Desai (eds.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II, pp. 131–32.

offered good security, to advance the loans that revenue payers traditionally relied upon. Therefore, the farmers and the kutkinadars heaped new abwabs onto the raiyats to achieve liquidity. In Burdwan, large numbers of raiyats complained in 1775 that the ijaradars were charging them improperly for settling their disputes; short-weighted coins; repairs of embankments; the costs of *ghi* (clarified butter) used at pujas; weddings of the raja, the ijaradar, and his naibs; share-cropped land; and trees, fish, and straw for which the raiyats said they had never paid before. The Burdwan Provincial Council sent amins into the mofussil to investigate the complaints and the result was, according to the Burdwan ijaradars, that the raiyats withheld their rents and engaged in disturbances. The Burdwan Council, always primarily concerned about the security of the revenue, decided to suspend the inquiry until the end of the collections and accordingly withdrew the amins.[81] The ijaradars and their dependent kutkinadars, knowing their tenure was about to end, tried to collect as much as they could from the raiyats so they could finish with a profit, or at least without arrears and the prospect of prison.

The other period in which management of revenue collections changed hands rapidly was in the decade following the Permanent Settlement of 1793. Once again, abwabs were one means by which the new holders and their amla were able to make up deficiencies in the rent rolls they obtained from the ousted zamindars. Such deficiencies were common because zamindari officials often falsified rent rolls and receipts prior to relinquishing to purchasers, in order to undermine the newcomers and keep alive the possibility of recovering their lands.

The high variability of zamindari demands and the political considerations that entered into their distribution ultimately defeated British efforts to impose reforms through administrative fiat. The very impermanence of the demands led Company servants to focus on its opposite: a perpetual settlement. A permanent tax was a fiscal oddity, born of perplexity and frustration. It was a decision that was intended to let the market for forfeited rights and the new debt laws accomplish what the British had failed to do – create regularity in agrarian relations.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the British were trying to transform the complex, localized, irregular, and contested exchange of services, produce, and cash to a more uniform, regular, predictable, contractual, and commercial system. They wanted to limit what they considered arbitrary, personal, and despotic authority and to transfer much of that authority, including judicial and police powers, from local magnates to state employees. They wanted an impersonal market to allocate what personal authority had previously deter-

[81] Burdwan PCOR, Prog. of 29 Dec. 1775, vol. II, and Prog. of 8 Jan. 1776, vol. 12.

mined. When Company officials examined the zamindari system, they tended to look at it exclusively as a revenue-collecting system and to miss both the ways in which it had once worked as a moral economy based on personal and constantly employed discretion and the ways in which the Company's own high revenue demands had distorted the working of the traditional system and compelled an increase in coercion.

Nevertheless, the abwab remained a central feature of the zamindari system, a patrimonial survival. A resolution of the Revenue Department in 1873, after noting the near-ubiquity of abwabs, concluded that "the system of illegal exactions is ... in such universal vogue, is so deeply rooted, and so many social relations depend thereon, that it becomes a question whether it is desirable that Government" should take strong or general actions against abwabs. While refusing to admit abwabs were legal, the government was resigned to their continuation and it satisfied itself by ordering Magistrate-Collectors to "interfere in the case of any extreme oppression."[82]

[82] Resolution of the Rev. Dept., Land Rev., 30 May 1873, Papers Regarding Illegal Cesses, p. 187.

4 Coercion

Physical coercion of delinquent rent and revenue payers was a routine feature of Mughal Bengali life. Bengali political practice treated the administering of corporal punishment according to dharmic rules as a necessary ingredient of localized authority and as a ritual of power. Authority to punish wrong-doing and compel the payment of revenue was delegated so that any person assigned to gather revenue enjoyed a *de facto* power to punish and coerce, usually without more than nominal supervision by state employees. Detentions, mild beatings, and the use of peons or foot soldiers to force people to pay their revenue were general phenomena in the early decades of Company rule and, almost as certainly, in the pre-Company period as well.

By the time the British began to rule Bengal, British attitudes towards non-familial chastisement were evolving towards a view that the individual should be a special object of protection by society's rules, by formal law. Eighteenth-century liberalism increasingly regarded physical coercion as the proper monopoly of the state and viewed private or non-state detentions, beatings, and torture as illegitimate, as a violation of the rights of individuals. Implicitly, some employees of the East India Company began to question an element of Bengali social organization that accepted the prerogative of leaders of innumerable small, local hierarchies to assume and imitate the functions of the raja in disciplining their subjects.

When Company servants objected to zamindari coercion of their tenants, they initially faulted the private agency of corporate punishment rather than the punishment itself. Michel Foucault is helpful here in understanding both British and Bengali attitudes. He has reminded us that public torture of criminals died out in Europe only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[1] At that time, the penitentary and penal labor were institutions largely of the future. Foucault's argument was that when an economy was still feudal, property was not sufficiently individualized to make its seizure a common form of punishment and the body was "in most cases the only property accessible."[2] "Penal

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977), p. 8.
[2] Ibid., p. 24.

torture" was administered both as a means to find the truth and to punish. It often was substituted for a formal inquiry.

> Beneath an apparently determined search for truth, one finds in classical torture the regulated mechanism of an ordeal: a physical challenge that must define the truth; if the patient is guilty, the pains that it imposes are not unjust; but it is also a mark of exculpation if he is innocent. In the practice of torture, pain, confrontation and truth were bound together: they worked together on the patient's body ... It is as if investigation and punishment had become mixed.[3]

In Bengali revenue collection, a similar process was at work. Often zamindari collection agents did not know if tenants were able to pay the demands and therefore the agents used detentions and beatings simultaneously to discover the veracity of tenant pleas of poverty and to punish them for their delinquency. Company employees in some cases objected to these procedures but had no mechanism with which to replace them until the introduction of mofussil courts in the 1790s.

Nevertheless, almost from the beginning of Company rule, Company servants sought to bring certain types of punishment under the control of state institutions. In 1773, Warren Hastings asserted the principle that the state was the proper locus of the right to sentence murderers, carry out the sentence, and pardon murderers. He denounced as "barbarous" the Islamic laws which allowed the kin of murdered people either to pardon or to carry out the sentence on the convicted killer. They were, he said, "contrary to the first principle of Civil society, by which the State acquires an interest in every member who composes it and a right in his security."[4] The authority and discretionary power in murder cases that Hastings reserved for the state, and denied to private individuals, was later also claimed in revenue- and rent-collection coercion.

British Company servants not only wanted to change the agency of coercion; they ultimately came to regard customary modes of coercion as illegitimate, even uncivilized. They still considered detention as acceptable, if publicly authorized, but they denounced and then made illegal the infliction of pain on debtors and criminals, with the exception of murderers and gang robbers. Distraint or forfeiture of property (crops, money, moveable property, or land) gradually replaced private detentions and beatings as the sanctioned form of coercion, on the assumption that distraint and forfeiture were more humane and efficient. Company servants tended to assume that, because compulsion was discretionary, it must also have been arbitrary and that because cases of cruelty were uncovered, the more common coercive practices were also inhumane. They failed to understand that in revenue collection the degrees of compulsion

[3] Ibid., p. 41.
[4] Hastings to BOR, 3 Aug. 1773, Monckton Jones, *Hastings in Bengal*, p.333.

were finely graded and often moderated by a sense of limits, by a set of cultural norms, just as they underestimated how the Company's policy of revenue maximization operated to push people to violate those norms. Whether Bengalis considered loss of property more humane that bodily coercion was not seriously considered.

The frequency with which zamindars' agents found it necessary to resort to physical compulsion did not mean that villagers questioned their obligation to pay either the state's demand or the intermediates' personal expenses. State and zamindari exactions were both historically familiar and culturally sanctioned. The key to understanding the pattern of detentions and beatings which characterized revenue collection seems rather to lie in the variability, high levels, and state-driven increases of revenue demands and in the traditional Mughal and Hindu views that physical compulsion was an essential ingredient of political authority. Moreover, physical coercion often served as a substitute for field-by-field assessments in determining what a peasant or intermediary could pay. Measured coercion was a test of wills and endurance entered into repeatedly, in game-like fashion. On one side, willingness to suffer confinement and corporal punishment was often as much a method of avoiding increased demands as a sign of over-assessment; on the other, force was applied to discover whether an assessee was sincere in claiming the demands were impractically high. In this endlessly repeated contest, coercion, like the periodic alterations in revenue and rent demands, was a means of reaffirming authority.

The coercive enviornment

To understand better the use of compulsion in zamindari revenue collection, we first consider how pervasively both the state and local powerholders employed physical force in political competition, trade, and revenue and judicial administration. Distinctions between state and private authority were usually ignored before the 1770s, except in the matter of capital punishment. Elaborate separation of state and private functions did not reach the mofussil until the 1790s when the Company introduced a mofussil civil court system, legally forbade physical coercion of renters, abolished zamindari police authority, and established its own mofussil police force. Until that time, and sometimes after it, a private individual might simultaneously collect revenue, coerce defaulters, punish crime, settle civil disputes, and enforce Hindu or Islamic behavioral codes.

Eighteenth-century nazims, with militaristic mentalities and with overwhelming military superiority over the divided, poorly armed zamindars, attacked, dispossessed, and imprisoned disobedient rajas without fear of effective opposition. Murshid Quli Khan and Qasim Ali (1760–63) confined and replaced large numbers of zamindars and Shuja-ud-din sent armed forces against outly-

ing districts to increase their payments. The harshest pre-1760 collection measures recorded are attributed to Murshid Quli's regime. He disciplined and punished amils (collectors), accountants, record keepers, and land measurers by placing guards over or confining them while denying them food, drink, and "calls of nature."[5] He was just as tough with zamindars.[6] Nazir Ahmad, formerly a foot soldier, was said to be responsible for trying to make defaulting zamindars pay up.

He used to suspend the zemindars by the heels, and after rubbing the soles of their feet with a hard brick, bastinado them with a switch. In the winter, he would order them to be stripped naked, and then sprinkled with water. And he also used to have them flogged, till they consented to pay the money.[7]

Sayyid Reza Khan, Murshid Quli's deputy diwan and husband of his granddaughter, was reported to put defaulting amils and zamindars into a pit

which was filled with human excrement in such a state of putrefecation as to be full of worms, and the stench was so offensive, that it almost suffocated whoever came near it ... He also used to oblige them to wear leather long drawers, filled with live cats. He would force them to drink buffaloe's milk mixed with salt, till brought them to death's door by a diarrhoea.[8]

Whether these stories were true or not,[9] there is no reason to doubt that Murshid Quli Khan was uncompromising in his efforts to bring discipline to this disorderly province. According to Salim Allah, when the kotwal (police officer) of Hughli took a young girl from her father, Murshid Quli had him stoned to death. The officer he appointed to suppress robbery along the road to Burdwan always cut the criminals in two after he caught them.[10] Murshid Quli even executed his own son in connection with "the death of an oppressed man."[11]

Murshid Quli used physical coercion for the "public" purposes of collecting revenues and punishing criminal behavior; Shuja-ud-din and Alivardi are not on record as using similar rigor for administrative goals. However, from Alivardi's time onwards both political murders and the forcing of people to gratify the sexual and other personal appetites of the nazims' family increased.

5 Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 92.
6 Sarkar (ed.), *History*, vol. II, p. 409.
7 [Allah], *Narrative*, p. 61.
8 Ibid., p. 80.
9 Karim doubts them because they were based on a single source (Salim Allah) and do not fit Murshid Quli's reputation for justice. *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 89. Ghulam Husain Khan (*Seir*, vol. I, p. 279), however, said that Murshid Quli imprisoned zamindars and "tormented [them] in such a variety of manners."
10 Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, pp. 71–73.
11 Salim, *Riyazu*, p. 282.

Alivardi lured Bhaskar Pandit and twenty-one Maratha *sirdars* (military leaders) to a meeting and then had them massacred in 1744.[12] Previously, while deputy governor of Bihar, Alivardi sent an expedition against the Banjara tribe of Bettia to punish them for their plundering. The expedition captured 20,000 Banjaras and marched them towards Patna. En route, any Banjara who tried to escape or otherwise disobeyed orders was cut down. By the time they reached Patna, 5,000 had been killed. Alivardi subsequently ordered the leader of this expedition slain for refusing to share the booty he had taken from the Banjaras.[13] In 1746, Alivardi had two rebel Muslim generals murdered when they tried to surrender and pledge their loyalty to Alivardi.[14] And he ordered the killings of other officers whose accounts were faulty.[15] Alivardi's grandson and designated successor, Siraj-ud-daula, carried out his murders.[16] Alivardi had finer feelings than his impetuous, cruel grandson and he "retired to one of his houses or gardens outside the town, so as not to hear the cries of the persons whom he was causing to be killed."[17]

The nazims' violence escalated as the Maratha and Afghan challenges, internal dissension, and finally British intervention threatened the government. Siraj, Mir Jafar, and Mir Qasim all employed murder to eliminate their opponents. Siraj not only killed his enemies but exhibited a sadistic cruelty not found in any other eighteenth-century nazim. He sent agents to kidnap pretty Hindu women they saw bathing on the banks of rivers and he had ferry boats overturned because he enjoyed seeing non-swimmers struggling to save themselves, according to the usually reliable Jean Law.[18] Pleasure-loving Mir Jafar left most of his administration to his son, Miran, who murdered "promiscuously" and who was said to have been carrying a list of two or three hundred people he planned to kill when he was struck dead by lightning.[19] Mir Qasim's murders, on the other hand, were purposeful and confined to the end of his reign. When he realized in 1763 that the East India Company had defeated his efforts to assert his sovereignty, he took revenge on those whom he believed had betrayed him. In the process, he caused the deaths, among others, of Ramnarayan, former deputy governor of Bihar; Rajballabh, deputy governor of Dacca and then Bihar; Gurjin Khan, his Armenian commander-in-chief who had introduced European-style training in his army; two members of the Jagat Seth banking

12 Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 461.
13 Karim Ali, *Muzaffar-namah*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, pp. 17–18.
14 Ibid., p. 35.
15 Ibid., pp. 52–53.
16 Ibid., pp. 54–55.
17 Memoir by Jean Law (1763), Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. III, p. 162.
18 Ibid.
19 Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, pp. 279–81 and 368–72. For Mir Jafar's murders, see ibid., pp. 251, 274, and 347.

family; and fifty-six British prisoners.[20] As the nazims' authority waned, murder became a more common instrument of policy. Later nazims also confiscated the property of wealthy people.

The nazims' aspirations to regulate Bengal's society were never matched by their institutional strength. Until the transfer of the *diwani* (revenue administration) to the Company in 1765, the nazim had overall responsibility for maintaining order, protecting his subjects, punishing wrong-doers, and settling disputes. The long hours spent listening to judicial cases and the authoritarian intrusiveness of energetic nazims into the life around the capital revealed that their own vision of public virtue far exceeded the capacity of their decentralized administration. Murshid Quli, for example, monitored the prices of food grains in Murshidabad and if he found the poor were overcharged, he punished the neighborhood leaders (*mahaldars*), grain dealers, and weigh-men, sometimes by placing them on asses and conveying them through streets.[21] Yet outside the major towns, principal trade routes, and his own jagir, the nazim's institutions for righting wrong and helping the poor were weakly articulated. His army could cope with internal disturbance but was useless for routine tasks of revenue collection and checking normal abuses by local officials and landholders. He reserved the right to sentence capital offenders and to assess, dispossess, or imprison sizeable zamindars. In theory at least, he or his officers apparently claimed the exclusive authority to readmit excommunicated persons to caste.[22] In practice, his authority ran thin in rural areas. There is little evidence of a system of local civil judicial codes, record keeping, or appeals from local decisions. His civil courts did not operate far from Murshidabad[23] and the towns in which his faujdars resided. The ten or so faujdars, each of whom had many zamindaris in his jurisdiction, sent troops against uncooperative zamindars and dakait (robber) gangs but their judicial and coercive activities, legendary though they were, normally were confined to the environs of their seat. A supervising officer at Murshidabad assigned *qazis,* learned in Islamic law, to enforce that law wherever bodies of Muslims lived,[24] and perhaps in every pargana. Apart from the qazis, the *faujdari adalats* (criminal courts) in major towns, and the *thanas* (police posts) on principal highways, the nazim's ordinary coercive and

[20] Henry Dodwell, *Dupleix and Clive: The Beginning of Empire* (Gorakhpur, 1962, reprint of 1920 edn.), pp. 230 and 247; Henry Vansittart, *A Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal, 1760–1764* (London, 1766, reprinted Calcutta, 1976, ed. Anil Chandra Bannerjee and Bimal Kanti Ghosh), pp. 561 and 566–67.

[21] Salim, *Riyazu,* p. 280.

[22] According to the Select Committee, 1769. D.N. Banerjee, *Early Land Revenue System in Bengal and Behar: 1765–1772,* vol. I (London, 1936), p. 62.

[23] *Fifth Report, 1812,* Firminger's Introduction, vol. I, p. xiv.

[24] Khan, *Seir,* vol. III, p. 165, contrasted the probity of the qazis in the early decades of the century with their corruption in the Company period.

judicial presence within zamindaris was minimal. The nazim left the zamindars to force their dependents to pay the revenue.

Early European merchants often commented on what they regarded as the arbitrary, despotic nature of Mughal authority and soon learned how to employ limited forms of physical force themselves. They were impressed that in the decentralized society of late Mughal Bengal local officials compelled people to pay more or accept less than prevailing market rates. Writing about Hughli port in the 1680s, William Hedges said the nawab "hath little more than the name, and for the most part sits still whilst the Nabobs officers oppress the People and monopolize most commodities even as low as grass for Beasts, canes, firewood, thatch." These officers either held back the revenue owed to the nazim or they obtained money from the capital at Dacca and loaned it to Hindu merchants at the confiscatory rate of 50 percent per year. They forced the merchants to buy goods at 10-15 percent above the market value and to make gifts on numerous ceremonial occasions.[25] Streynsham Master concluded in 1679 that in Hughli there "is no order or Government. Every petty Officer makes a pray of us and abuscing us at pleasure to Screw what they can out of us."[26] Local officials frequently stopped European trading boats and caravans, despite imperial farmans (orders) exempting them from transit duties, and released them only after a present or a show of force by the Europeans or an order from the nazim.

Long before Plassey the Europeans exerted their own coercive power where the nazim's authority was weak. They seized merchants who owed them money and held them in their factories and they sent soldiers to the houses of the *paikars* (petty brokers) and weavers to ensure they did not sell the contracted goods to other parties.[27] In the last decades of nawabi rule, the English East India Company took advantage of Mughal decline to force weavers to produce for the Company and to allow their dependents to carry *dastaks* (permits) for duty-free trade, in violation of the intent of the emperor's farman that gave the Company permission to trade in Bengal.[28] In the 1750s and 1760s, Company servants sold dastaks widely to non-Company Indian merchants so they too could avoid paying duty. In the same period, they used their new power to monopolize many items of trade.

For all the exactions and oppressive activities by Europeans and Indian powerholders in the late nawabi and early Company periods, the bulk of the population seemed to be law-abiding. Dakaiti, for example, was a common

[25] [William Hedges], *The Diary of William Hedges, Esq. during his Agency in Bengal (1681–1687)* (2 vols., London, 1887–88), vol. II, pp. 238–39.
[26] Richard Carnac Temple (ed.), *The Diaries of Streynsham Master, 1675–1680* (2 vols., London 1911), vol. II, p. 275.
[27] Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, pp. 109-110.
[28] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. I, pp. 8ff.

phenomenon only in frontier and jungly areas in the middle decades of the century,[29] in contrast to the early nineteenth century when it was prevalent in the interior districts. Nor, apparently, was individual theft common. Warren Hastings, with many years of experience around Qasimbazar beginning in 1753, wrote in 1772 "there are not many instances of robbery in India,...scarce any of murder" in areas where murder was punished by execution. "A traveller may pass through a whole province unarmed and sleep in security in the open plane. He will have no enemies to dread but the wild beasts." Hastings attributed this both to "the natural timidity of the people" and the deterrent effect of executions.[30] Luke Scrafton, who held positions in Dacca, Calcutta, and Murshidabad in the 1750s, claimed in about 1760 that "so free is the country from robbers, that I doubt there having been an instance of one in the memory of man."[31] J.Z. Holwell also claimed that in Bishnupur "no robberies are heard of."[32] Sayyid Ghulam Husain Khan, writing in the 1780s, believed that as late as Alivardi's reign, people were so prosperous and faujdars so vigilant that people "lived with their doors open"[33]

Both the British and the nazims understood well that military power and its display would determine the willingness of Bengal's elites to cooperate with them. The ability to compel compliance implied legitimacy. The Company's 1686–90 war with the Mughals had taught the British they were at that time no match for the nazim in a land war but it also strengthened their conviction about the need to fortify their factories and to have armed guards accompany their inland trade to prevent local officers from exacting unauthorized payments. From 1690 to the 1750s, the combination of European arms and the nazims' desire to encourage European trade ensured an uneasy balance of strength between the Company and local officers.

With Siraj-ud-daula's seizure of Calcutta in 1756, this balance evaporated. The Company used the opportunity in the ensuing war to demonstrate the immense destructive power of their cannons and the efficient discipline of their enhanced army, "to strike a terror into the Suba's troops and encourage any malcontents to declare in our favour,"[34] and "to re-establish the reputation of the British in Bengal." For ten days in January 1757, Company ships shelled Hughli town, the nazim's forts, and the granaries and salt warehouses on both

[29] Monckton Jones, *Hastings in Bengal*, p. 330.
[30] Ibid., p. 158.
[31] Luke Scrafton, *A History of Bengal before and after the Plassey (1739–1758)* (Calcutta, 1975, reprint of 1760 edn. of *Reflections on Government etc., of Indostan*), p. 11.
[32] John Zephaniah Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events* (London, 1766), p. 198.
[33] Khan, *Seir*, vol. III, pp. 179–81.
[34] Letter from Select Com., Fort William, to Secret Com., London, 26 Jan. 1757, Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. II, p. 167.

sides of the river. Company troops burned and plundered houses in Hughli so that the town was destroyed.[35] The pillaging and destruction was not different in character from Mughal warfare (the Mughals, for example, had killed some 10,000 people when they destroyed Portuguese Hughli in 1632);[36] the main distinction was that the British were usurping power from the established government. Previously, the Company had refrained from executing people unless they had the nazim's permission; after 1757 when *sepoys* mutinied over the differentials in prize-money paid to European and Indian troops, Company officers "picked out" men to make examples of and blew them from guns.[37] As part of the price for establishing Mir Jafar as the new nazim of Bengal in 1757, the Company obtained a new sanad (charter) granting the Company the "power to punish" any person who asked for any payments on articles of trade.[38]

As soon as the British appreciated the magnitude of their own strength and the nazim's weakness, inhibitions on their own acquisitiveness fell away and they scrambled to enrich themselves by monopolizing trade and demanding presents for the exercise of their new influence. During the rule of Mir Jafar (1757–60) and Mir Qasim (1760–63), complaints multiplied that the Company's servants and their gomashtas were usurping the nazim's authority by insisting on not paying duties on their internal trade, by forcing people to buy above and sell below current market rates, and by setting themselves up as judicial officers. A Company army sergeant wrote from Bakarganj in 1762 that gomashtas working for Company servants were flogging and confining people who refused to trade with them.

> Before, justice was given in the public cutcherree, but now every gomestah is become a judge, and every one's house a cutcherree; they even pass sentences on the Zamindars themselves, and draw money from them by pretended injuries, such as a quarrel with some of their peons, or their having, as they assert, stole something.[39]

Mir Qasim complained vigorously to the Company that their servants not only refused to pay duties but were forcing raiyats to give up items for a quarter of their value and to purchase goods at five times their real price. "Your gentlemen...make a disturbance all over my country, plunder the people, injure and disgrace my servants, with a resolution to expose my government to contempt; and from the borders of Hindustan to Calcutta, make it their business to expose me to scorn."[40]

35 Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. I, pp. cxxxvii-cxli.
36 Amiya Kumar Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly* (Calcutta, 1972), p. 119.
37 Dodwell, *Dupleix and Clive*, p. 257.
38 Ibid., pp. 234–35.
39 Vansittart, *Narrative*, pp. 198–99.
40 Letter from nawab to Gov. H. Vansittart, May 1762, ibid., pp. 191–92.

Zamindari coercion

The nazims and the early Company government allowed rajas considerable latitude within their petty kingdoms to compel and punish their subjects. Both the coercive environment of the age and traditional theories of Hindu kingship encouraged local powerholders to use physical compulsion whenever their authority and the habits of deference failed to produce compliance. The normative texts on kingship recognized both coercion and taxation as the prerogatives of the raja but coercion seemed to be the preeminent function, "the cultural element...that distinguished the kingly role from other roles."[41] The right to tax was presented as merely "an accessory of the royal function" while coercion was "a divine institution itself," created by the highest deity for the maintenance of human welfare.[42]

The king's main duty was protection of his subjects and for this *danda* was necessary. Danda means literally mace, scepter, rod, or stick but is also synonymous with chastisement and coercion. *Dandaniti* (the rule of danda) was a common term for the science of government in recognition of the central role of the king's coercion in enabling subjects to fulfill their respective *svadharmas* (own duties). Law commentaries assumed that in this degraded age, without danda, without restraint, the strong would prey on the weak, just as big fish feed on little fish.[43] Many aphorisms expressed the necessity of the sovereign's force to maintain the social and spiritual order, to ensure that "wholesome barriers are maintained,"[44] rituals are performed, the good are rewarded, and the bad are chastised. The *Mahabharata* states "right leans on might (*danda*) as a creeper on a tree. As smoke follows the wind, so right follows might."[45] And "if the rod of chastisement be not uplifted, the dog will lick the sacrificial butter."[46] Bhisma told Yudhishtara in the Santiparva of the *Mahabharata* that Manu's "first words" were that "he who protects all creatures the loved and odious equally, by impartially wielding the rod of Chastisement, is said to be the embodiment of righteousness."[47] Most of the lengthy discussion of danda in normative texts on kingship relates to the expansion and protection of kingdoms and the punishment of evil but the need to use danda in tax collection was not questioned.[48] Without the wealth derived

[41] Ronald Inden, "Ritual Authority and Cyclic Time in Hindu Kingship," in J.F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Madison, WI, 1978), p. 35.

[42] Robert Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, tr. J. Duncan M. Derrett (Berkeley, CA, 1973), p. 214.

[43] Kane, *History*, vol. III, pp. 5–7 and 21–22.

[44] *Mahabharata*, tr. Roy, vol. VII, p. 165.

[45] Quoted in Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism* (New York, 1968), vol I, p. 267.

[46] *Mahabharata*, tr. Roy, vol. VII, p. 29.

[47] Ibid., pp. 278–79.

[48] See example, ibid., pp. 304 and 306.

from taxes, the raja is helpless to protect his subjects, and, without danda, subjects will not obey their raja, cultivate their fields, pay taxes, or live dharmic lives. Danda thus was identified with wealth, dharma,[49] *vyavahara* (law and justice), and Vishnu himself.[50] Rajas were warned against avarice and cruelty but since dharma depended on danda, the king was told that power appears "to be superior to Righteousness,"[51] and that if he wanted more wealth, he should increase his taxes slowly, like a person breaking in a young bullock. If he moved with care and mildness, he could slip the reigns on to his people and they would become manageable.[52]

While there is no doubt about the wide freedom zamindars enjoyed to employ normatively approved danda under the nazims, it is less clear whether they used it with restraint. For example, in theory the Mughal government reserved to itself the right to execute or maim those found guilty of major crimes. The nazims are not known to have exercised the right with great frequency. What about the zamindars? Did they become more coercive in the middle decades of the eighteenth century in their judicial administration and revenue collection as the Maratha invasions, the rise in the state's revenue demand, and the European usurpation of the nazims' authority all contributed to an erosion of order and established hierarchy? Without knowing more about the operating of zamindaris in the early decades of the century, we may only guess at the answer and indicate that evidence for the middle decades points to zamindars employing physical coercion without external restraints.

One of the most vivid and suggestive descriptions of a pre-Company zamindar's use of discretionary power over human life appears in the Vidya-Sundara episode of the Annadamangal kavya by Bharatchandra Ray (1712–60), written in 1752 or 1753. It was a work of hyperbolic fiction but its depiction of the raja of Burdwan appears to be a plausible, if exaggerated, portrait of a major zamindar, given what we know about the operation of zamindari power in the mid-eighteenth century. When the stranger-hero, Sundara, came to Burdwan town, he passed six forts and garrisons before reaching a central square.

> In the middle of the square was a prison and the execution ground. And all around were thousands of robbers and thieves, chains on their legs, begging for food... The noise was like that of hell itself, with the cracking of bones and the snap of the lash and slap of leather on human flesh. Some of the wretched prisoners, were praying, some were screaming, and some moaning "Father, O father! I am dying! Save me!" and in fear of their chief, some of the guards showed mercy.[53]

49 Heesterman, *Inner Conflict*, p. 122.
50 *Mahabharata*, tr. Roy, vol. VII, pp. 278–79.
51 Ibid., p. 306. The usual principle in the *smriti* (non-Vedic sacred tradition) is that "a rule of *dharma* has more weight than a rule of *artha*." Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, p. 157.
52 *Mahabharata*, tr. Roy, vol. VII, p. 205.
53 "The Vidya-Sundara of Bharatchandra," in Edward C. Dimock, (tr.), *The Thief of Love: Bengali Tales from Court and Village* (Chicago, 1963), p. 34.

Was Bharatchandra describing the reality of a zamindari in Bengal or was he employing the literary conventions used to describe danda, such as the Santi-parva's account of danda as a deity, "piercing and cutting and afflicting and lopping off and dividing and striking and slaying and rushing against its victims?"[54] Either explanation is possible. The fact that the raja of Burdwan in real life had confiscated Bharatchandra's family estate in 1740 and imprisoned Bharatchandra for protesting may have colored his account: he may have been taking revenge on his former raja.[55]

The name of the captain of the Burdwan raja's guard was Dhumaketu. Among his responsibilities was guarding the apartments of Vidya, the raja's daughter. The stranger, Sundara, managed to sneak into Vidya's quarters with the help of Hira, the flower woman, and he and Vidya fell in love. When the raja of Burdwan discovered that Vidya was pregnant, he ordered his swordsmen and mace-bearers to bring Dhumaketu to him:

> Hear me. If you catch not him who has defamed my name before this day is out, you will know the power of my vengeance. You are a treacherous rogue who eats my salt and gives me nothing in return. You have ruined my kingdom; you are nothing but a robber. You have plundered my whole country until only my own palace is left, and now you have begun on that. But I shall see you, you bastard, buried in a pit of excrement; you will know my pride for what it is.[56]

While the raja of Burdwan would not hesitate to kill Dhumaketu, he realized that dharma, although apparently not the Mughal government, made it unwise to execute Hira, the flower woman who had been the agent of Sundara's entry into Vidya's rooms. "What will I gain if I kill her?" he thought. "On the contrary, it will only make things worse. To kill a woman is a heinous crime." Instead, he ordered that her head be shaven and her face disfigured with "lime and black stain" and that she be taken to the far side of the river. Similarly, he did not dare kill Sundara, in fear that he might be a Brahmin. "I can tell from his behavior he is not low-caste. If I have him killed, how do I know what will happen at the end?"[57]

This fictional account had the raja of Burdwan torturing "robbers and thieves" in a public place and preparing to kill one of his own officers. There is no reason to doubt that pre-Company zamindars and their officers used torture and murder to deter others from disloyalty and wrong-doing. Company records provide numerous examples even in the nineteenth century of landholders' amla, dakaits, and the Company's own police torturing people, and these suggest that

[54] *Mahabharata*, tr. Roy, vol. VII, p. 279.
[55] Dimock (tr.), *Thief of Love*, p. 20.
[56] Ibid., p. 96.
[57] Ibid., pp. 120–25.

the application of severe pain to the human body may have been fairly common at all levels of society. The power of large zamindars to do what they wanted with their subjects was proverbial. At least on occasion this extended to maiming or taking the lives of miscreants in real life as well as in literature. There is a story that Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia "cut off the hands of a goldsmith, who had mixed inferior metals in a golden image of Doorga: but afterwards for his dexterity, granted him and his heirs an annual pension of a thousand roopees."[58] J.Z. Holwell told the story of how Raja Kirtichandra (probably the raja of Burdwan who died in 1740) punished his diwan's naib named Gopi Singh. Gopi Singh was "convicted" of "holding farms clandestinely, of oppressing the people, of perpetrating other crimes." After the raja had him imprisoned and lashed and confiscated his property, he had Gopi Singh placed on a public road where passing people were ordered to kick him until he died.[59] Whether such incidences were common is not known.

After Company rule began, officials moved promptly to punish similar behavior. In 1776, they ordered the arrest of Raja Jadhu Singh of Bagri in western Burdwan district when they learned he had executed several people.[60] Two years later, they investigated rumors that a female cashkeeper of the Rani Bishnukumari of Burdwan had died from injuries inflicted on her because of suspicions of embezzlement.[61] After the 1770s, reports of zamindari murders and executions were rare.

Non-lethal coercion was another matter. Company officials sometimes deplored torture and they occasionally issued orders to regulate the use of physical compulsion by zamindars, farmers, and their agents. Basically, though, they saw no way to collect the land revenue without tolerating the detentions and beatings with which rents were traditionally secured. In the zamindari system, physical coercion was exercised both within and outside zamindari courts. The organization of zamindari courts varied from estate to estate. Burdwan had one of the most elaborate systems of local courts, in part because of its large size but also because it was the only zamindari in Bengal to which the nazims had granted faujdari (criminal) jurisdiction, including punishment of capital offenses.[62] In addition to the Burdwan criminal court, there were seven others in 1765, including separate courts for land and rental disputes, other debt suits,

[58] Ward, *View*, vol. I, p. 100.
[59] John Zephaniah Holwell, *India Tracts* (3rd edn., London 1774), p. 197.
[60] Burdwan PCOR, 12 and 28 Feb. 1776, vol. 12.
[61] Burdwan PCOR, 7 Sept. 1778, vol. 26.
[62] Warren Hastings' Minute of 7 Dec. 1775, App. No. 15, Sixth Report from the Select Committee Appointed to Take into Consideration the State of the Administration of Justice in the Provinces of Bengal, Bahar, and Orissa, 1782, *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, vol. V, *East Indies – 1781, 1782* (London, 1804), p. 940. Hereafter cited as Sixth Report on Justice, 1782.

charges of misbehavior such as adultery and abortion, and suits over charitable lands. The main court for revenue and rental matters was called the sadr kachari and it not only heard disputes, it also collected revenue.[63]

Zamindari courts in Burdwan and elsewhere were not popular institutions, according to British officials. William Hay, who served in Burdwan in the early 1760s, reported that litigants were charged high court costs in addition to the traditional chauth or quarter share of the award which a successful creditor had to give to the court.[64] The Committee of Secrecy in 1773 confirmed that the mofussil courts, whether under the qazis or the zamindars, were arbitrary, irregular, and unpopular, and that victors were required to surrender one fourth (chauth) or one fifth of their awards to the judges.[65] Charles Stuart, Resident at Burdwan, commented on the corruption of Hindu and Muslim Judges.[66] Harry Verelst, who had also served in Burdwan, said "every decision is a corrupt bargain with the highest bidder."[67] G.G. Ducarel, Supervisor in Purnia, claimed "thefts and murders were compromised for four or five rupees, while fornication and witchcraft were punished with four or five thousands."[68] On the other hand, Evan Law, Richard Barwell, and James Rennell testified to the probity of qazis, *muftis, maulvis,* and pandits who advised on legal matters, and Charles William Boughton Rous, former Provincial Chief at Dacca, denied that justice was sold.[69] Generally corrupt or not, at best zamindari courts were irregular, expensive, and scarcely supervised.

In the absence of a comprehensive Company judicial system outside the district headquarters before the 1790s, landholders, money-holders, and merchants on their own authority distressed people who owed them money. Before the Cornwallis reforms, most rural Bengalis probably found little to distinguish between the way debts were collected under the nazim and the Company, despite a growing British awareness of and hostility to the arbitrariness of the processes employed.

Zamindari officers and their subordinate landholders used a wide range of coercive measures against land revenue payers. Coercion could begin as early

63 N. Majumdar, *Justice and Peace in Bengal, 1765–1793: A Study of the Nizamat in Decline* (Calcutta, 1960), p. 34.

64 Vansittart, *Nárrative*, p. 293.

65 Seventh Report from the Committee of Secrecy to Enquire into the State of the East India Company, 6 May 1773, *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, vol. IV, *East Indies – 1772, 1773* (London, 1804), p. 324.

66 Ibid., p. 328.

67 H.H. Dodwell (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, vol. V, *British India, 1479–1858* (Cambridge, 1929), p. 415.

68 Majumdar, *Justice*, p. 74.

69 Report from the Committee on Petitions Relative to the Administration of Justice in India, 8 May 1781. *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, vol. V, *East Indies – 1781, 1782*, pp. 14–16. Hereafter cited as Report on Petitions, 1781.

as the annual puniya, when principal payers gathered to discharge balances, receive the coming year's demands, and enter into their annual agreements. If the jotdar or intermediary refused the agreement offered, he might be confined or have peons[70] stationed around his house until he engaged for a mutually acceptable amount. After an agreement was made, the relevant collecting agent in pre-Company days sent a *hal-i-shana*, who was a foot soldier, to collect the periodic kists from the jotdars.[71] Under the Company, many zamindars may have continued the practice of sending a soldier to collect the rent. The Amini Commission report (1778) said that a *hal-i-shana* collected "where rents are paid in kind" and that otherwise the *karamchari* or patwari, resident villagers, collected the revenue.[72] The main point here is that a man representing the superior's military power sometimes came to the village, reminding the inhabitants of the possibility of a visit by raja's militia or *lathials* (men who carried *lathis* or bamboo staves) in case there was a general refusal.

General refusals were uncommon, except when a large increase was demanded or when a new zamindar or revenue farmer took over a tract of land from a dispossessed holder. Individual and group failures to meet the demand were frequent, and revenue receivers had a distinctive way of forcing payment.

The standard method of collecting arrears was to send one or more peons, often referred to as *mohussils,* to the house of the person from whom payment was sought. Sometimes the collector obtained permission from a zamindari or Company court to dispatch peons but often he acted without specific authorization. The peons either remained at the house of the renter in arrears until he paid or they were ordered to withdraw, or they led him to their master's kachari where they locked him in the interior or put him in stocks in public view.[73] Either way, the peons charged the debtor for their living expenses while away from their homes. Thus the longer the debtor held out, the greater were his expenses. As in colonialism, the victim was made to pay for his own subjection. Not infrequently, the peons seized moveable property, such as stored food, cooking utensils, or animals, from the victim. Often they beat or otherwise physically abused the debtor. Sometimes they cut down the standing crop. The fact that the peons were often north Indians or low caste Bengalis, typically

70 "Peon" entered Indian English from Portuguese. Meaning literally footman, it was used originally for a foot soldier and later for an orderly or a messenger. Peon is a cognate of *piyada,* the Hindustani word for foot soldier. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive* (New Delhi, 1969, reprint of 1903 edn.), p. 696.

71 According to the *Risala-i-ziraat,* Calkins, "Revenue Administration," p. 180.

72 Ramsbotham, *Studies,* pp. 108–09.

73 The naib of Swaruppur, formerly part of the Rajshahi zamindari, told J.H. Harrington in 1790 that he first beat the amin and the patwari of a village in arrears and "if the Ryots are not awed" by this, he beat the raiyats. Ray, *Change,* p. 51.

Bagdis, lessened the chance that feelings of ethnic solidarity would interfere with the performance of their duties. And because the peons received much, perhaps most of their income from exactions from the peasantry, the system enabled the zamindars "to maintain a large body of dependents at modest cost to themselves."[74]

Beatings by peons were often administered with a *rattan* or palm-stem switch. A leather whip (*kora*) was sometimes used. Floggings with a thorny branch and an inflammatory nettle plant were also known.[75] If the victim was high caste, slippers were often substituted for the switch. The victim was normally the recorded revenue payer but if he had absconded, a surrogate such as his son, vakil, or surety was sometimes beaten instead.[76] Female revenue payers and the wives of absconding tenants were not beaten, only confined.[77]

Although British officials recognized that beatings were a universal practice, they suspected that peasants sometimes falsely accused their superiors of torture in order to avoid payment. This was the conclusion of a special commission appointed to investigate an unusual uprising by small "zamindars" (intermediaries) and peasants in Rangpur in early 1783 which the Company suppressed with "the loss of many lives." The revolt was ostensibly against the high demands and severe collection methods used by Raja Debi Sinha, the new revenue farmer of Dinajpur and Rangpur districts and former revenue employee of the Company.[78] The commission found that in addition to the customary forms of detentions and beatings, various unusual tortures were used, including driving wedges between two fingers tied together and pinching flesh in the lock of a gun.[79] They failed to confirm that Raja Debi Sinha's agents burned raiyats' houses, squeezed nipples in cleft bamboos, raped, or stripped people. Many witnesses examined by the commission denied having made their original complaints. The commission concluded that "there is no language of complaint which the natives will not adopt to evade the payment of their revenue,"[80] and that a shortage of money, rather than unusual oppression, was at the base of the revolt.[81] Whether or not the commission was justified in its skepticism about torture, it did document more fully than any other source that confinements and

[74] E. Barnett, Rajshahi Ag. Col., to BOR, 16 Aug. 1811, BOR Misc. Prog. 11 of 31 Dec. 1811, vol. 799.

[75] Report of the Rungpore Commission, 23 March 1786, Sinha, *Maharaja Deby Sinha*, pp. 568–69.

[76] "As late as 1775," many Bhats, who were geneologists and bards, "made their living by pledging themselves as hostages for the payment of a revenue." Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, p. 101.

[77] Sinha, *Maharaja Deby Sinha*, pp. 571–73.

[78] COR to GG, 27 Jan. 1784, ibid., pp.12–13.

[79] Report of the Rungpore Commission, 23 March 1786, ibid., pp. 520–21.

[80] Ibid., pp. 571–75 and 583.

[81] Ibid., p. 520.

beatings were used routinely "throughout Bengal" against the intermediaries and raiyats.

The investigation into the Rangpur disturbances also revealed instances of the use of shame to punish people. Shame was commonly employed in Bengal, as in the common practice of putting people in arrears into stocks outside zamindari kacharis. The Rangpur Commission reported that Raja Debi Sinha learned that the manager of one of his parganas in Dinajpur district was oppressing the peasants and he therefore ordered the manager to be paraded through the bazar on a bullock to the beat of a drum.[82] In another case, when a Brahmin naib to some intermediate "zamindars" complained about the raja's unreasonable demands, Debi Sinha first ordered the same bullock ride punishment but then altered it to "a most severe and cruel flogging" when bystanders objected the ride would lead to the Brahmin's excommunication from his caste.[83]

Hinduism and infliction of pain

In a loose way, the procedures used to recover rental arrears conformed to methods prescribed in the legal texts for the recovery of debts. It is remarkable that the law commentaries gave little attention to agricultural rents. But the discussion of recovery of loans is extensive and some of these rules seemed to guide Bengal's practices in rent collection. For example, several sources permit debt recovery without reference to the king. In fact, this was the one general area in which a person was explicitly "allowed to take the law into his own hands," although people of very low status could be punished for so doing without the king's authorization.[84] A creditor might recover what he was owed on his own initiative and should "not be blamed by the king." If necessary, he could use force.[85] Brihaspati allowed a creditor to bring a debtor to his own house and confine and beat him. Katyayana provided that a debtor could be restrained "openly before an assembly of people until he pays what is due."[86] Confining in stocks and sending peons to a renter's house were consistent with these rules. Similarly, the cutting of an indebted peasant's crop and the sale of his possessions was authorized by Bharadvija.[87] When the Company's Hindu pandits were asked in 1798 whether these measures were consistent with Hindu law, they replied that Manu allowed a creditor to confine a debtor and to seize his family, cattle, and other property, and then if that did not work, to flog and

[82] Ibid., p. 565.
[83] J.D. Peterson to GG in C, 6 June 1785, ibid., p. 270.
[84] Kane, *History*, vol. III, p. 408.
[85] G. Buhler (tr.), *The Laws of Manu* (Oxford, 1886), p. 262.
[86] Kane, *History*, vol. III, pp. 439–40.
[87] Ibid., p. 441.

imprison him. However, they added that Manu approved of these measures only if they were carried out with the knowledge and approval of "the *hakim*" (Arabic for ruler or governor). Since the zamindari courts were established under the *hakim*'s regulations, the pandits said that Manu's laws appeared to sanction the measures if authorized by zamindari officers.[88]

In eighteenth-century Bengal, the pressure applied to collect rental arrears and other debts, as well as to punish crimes, often took on some of the characteristics of an ordeal. The ordeal (*divya*) was a well-known institution in Indian juridical texts, as in medieval Europe and many other pre-modern societies.[89] In India, ordeals were used in both criminal and debt cases. Raghunandana Bhattacarya's *Divyatattva*, an authoritative statement on ordeals, was well known in Bengal among pandits[90] and his work remained the basis of the curriculum of the Calcutta Sanskrit College well into the nineteenth century.[91] Although ordeals were intended to discover the truth behind an accusation of wrong-doing only when other forms of evidence were unavailable, the spirit of the ordeal seemed to pervade various forms of coercion, including those used to collect the land revenue. The ordeal, in effect, absolved its administrator from some responsibility for the pain inflicted because it rested on the expectation of divine intervention. If the victim was telling the truth, the deity would protect him from injury. "For Raghunandana the oath or ordeal was a means of beseeching the deity to 'give testimony' on behalf of the one undergoing the ordeal."[92] Similarly, the application of duress to persons who failed to pay their rents or debts seemed at times to be an effort to discover if they were telling the truth in claiming their resources were exhausted. If they were being truthful, either the deity would intervene to save them or at least the pain would be purificatory. The king's danda fulfilled "the priestly function of purifying the evil-doer."[93] Either way, the ability to pay did not have to be established in advance by the person in power. And the victim, if not broken, might emerge as a "hero," as a person who struggled against "the monstrousness of the strong and powerful."[94] The East India Company made trials by ordeal illegal but

88 Translation of a representation from Hindu Law Officers of the SDA, 5 Jan. 1798, JP, Crim., Prog. 29 of 10 Oct. 1799, vol. 54.

89 Kane, *History*, vol. III, pp. 361–78.

90 Dinesh Chandra Sen wrote that Raghunandana's "jurisprudence up till now governs Hindu society in Bengal." *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta, 1954), p. 365.

91 Richard W. Lariviere, *The Divyattava of Raghunandana Bhattacarya: Ordeal in Classical Hindu Law* (New Delhi, 1981), p. xi.

92 Ibid., p. xiii.

93 Heesterman, *Inner Conflict*, p. 110.

94 This phrase was used by Foucault in a different context, to describe European literature glorifying the condemned man's struggle "against the law, against the rich, the powerful, the magistrates, the constabulary or the watch, against taxes and their collectors." *Discipline and Punish*, p. 67.

Bengalis continued to use ordeals as a means of testing guilt or proving innocence. W. Ward related an instance in 1807 in a village near Nadia in which a woman was "charged with criminal intrigue, while her husband was absent." Before 7,000 spectators, she put her hand in boiling *ghi* (clarified butter). The crowd, "on beholding this proof of her innocence, burst forth into applauses of dhunya, dhunya, i.e., happy! happy! The whole concluded with a feast" to the Brahmins, and word of the woman's virtue "spread through all the neighboring villages."[95]

The common subjection to physical coercion had a distinct echo in the popular religion of western Bengal's lowest castes, in the worship and myths of Manasa and Dharma Thakur. In the Manasa *mangalkavyas* (poems eulogizing the deity), Manasa, the goddess of snakes, compelled people to worship her. Her "ways with men follow a defineable pattern: first an act of terror, followed by submission; second the revelation of herself and the granting of boons, followed by the institution of regular worship."[96] In Ketaka-Dasa's *Manasa Mangal*, Manasa stole 1,600 cows from some cowherds, took the catch from two fishermen, and sent an army of serpents to kill all the people of Hasan's city in order to force them to worship her. Manasa's chief protagonist was Chando, the merchant, whose crops she destroyed, sons she killed, and ships she sank. In her struggle with Chando, she alternated random violence with an "equally random compassion,"[97] not unlike a revenue collector with his subordinates.

Unlike Manasa, Dharma Thakur, who is associated with the sun and brings rain and fertility, did not so much compel people to worship him as rescue them from terrible ordeals and suffering if they became his devotees. In the main episode of the numerous *Dharma Mangalkavyas* composed from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, Lausen was the hero. Before Lausen's birth, his father, Karna, had been driven from his fort on the Ajay river, between Burdwan and Birbhum districts, and saw his six sons killed by Ichhai Ghosh, an oppressive agent of the eleventh-century emperor of Gauda. Karna then remarried and his wife gave him a new son, Lausen. Lausen struggled through dozens of hardships, penances, and challenges, including attacks by vicious wild animals, false accusations of theft, attempts at sexual seduction, attacks on his life, war against the rebellious people of Kamrup (Assam), and war against the evil Ichhai Ghosh. In the end, Lausen triumphed over all adversity, with the help of and because of his devotion to Dharma Thakur.[98]

95 Ward, *View*, vol I, p. 45.

96 T.W. Clark, "Evolution of Hinduism in Medieval Bengali Literature: Siva, Candi, Manasa," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 17, pt. 3 (1955), p. 507.

97 Dimock (tr.), *Thief of Love*, pp. 202–06.

98 Asutosh Bhattacharyya, *The Sun and the Serpent Lore of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1977), pp. 85–88; Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 62–65.

The immense popularity of Manasa and Dharma Thakur among Bagdis, Bauris, Doms, Haris, and other "degraded" castes may be connected to the parallels between their own suffering and experience of coercion as laborers under the jotdars and the travails of Chando, Lausen, and the other victims whose faith in Manasa and Dharma Thakur redeemed them. Their religious faith may have been part of an ideology of the oppressed. Indeed, a popular saying was "Dharma nichagami" or "Dharma favors the low."[99] Living on the physical and cultural margins of village societies, excluded from major parts of village ritual cycles, they had been incorporated into the ideological hegemony of puja but with a special twist, an emphasis on pain and suffering.[100]

Self-infliction of pain was an important part of the annual Gajan festivals at which either Dharma Thakur or Shiva was honored. (In Bengali folk religion, Shiva is conceived of as a poor man who took to agriculture to feed his hungry family.) Gajan festivals in the twentieth century are probably the most numerous and most popular ones in southwest Bengal[101] and they may also have been in the eighteenth century. Typically, the final ritual of the Gajan was *charak* or hook-swinging. Large numbers of Bauris and other low caste men participated in this rite. They swung high above the ground, from a beam which rotated from the top of a vertical pole, suspended by metal hooks which had been inserted under the flesh and tendons in their back. Associated rituals included piercing their skin or bodies with sharpened sticks or iron spikes, walking on burning coals, other play with fire,[102] and reclining on a bed of nails.[103] The explicit purpose of these exposures to pain was to demonstrate that the deity was so pleased with the *bhaktas'* (devotees) devotion that he protected them from injury. Yet, it is also possible to suggest, without denying either the authenticity of the *bhaktas'* spirituality or physiological immunity to the sensation of pain, that these lower caste mortifications may have functioned as both preparation for the hardships and physical chastisements experienced in daily life and a means of deriving some meaning or ennoblement from otherwise grim subjection. Self-induced pain or the imperviousness to pain might even have functioned as a message to social superiors that their capacity to tolerate bodily coercion was vast.

[99] J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan* (Calcutta, 1910), p. 58.

[100] For a discussion of the theories of peasant acceptance or rejection of dominant belief systems, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT, 1985), pp. 314 ff.

[101] Over 100,000 people have attended recent annual Shiva Gajans at Tarakeswar where hook-swinging used to be practiced. A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly*, p. 207. Of the 201 Bankura fairs and festivals listed in the 1951 census, 117 were related to the Gajan festival. Amiya Kumar Banerji, *WBDG: Bankura* (Calcutta, 1968), p. 204.

[102] A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Bankura*, pp. 542 and 553, and Bhattacharyya, *The Sun*, pp. 65–68.

[103] Piyushkanti Mahapatra, *The Folk Cults of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1972), pp. 114 and 118.

What is the significance of the fact that by the eighteenth century Brahmin poets were writing mangalkavyas in honor of Manasa and Dharma Thakur and that in the nineteenth century, if not earlier, Brahmin priests had begun to preside over some of the worship of these presumably pre-Aryan deities?[104] There are several possible, complementary explanations that do not diminish the theory that Manasa and Dharma Thakur worship expressed the experience of social oppression. Learned men often absorbed popular, aboriginal practices into Hinduism, by Brahminizing them and providing Hindu mythological associations, as they did with Manasa and Dharma Thakur. For their part, low caste devotees may have welcomed and aided the process of Sanskritization because it brought their religion closer to the mainstream Hinduism of the prestigious higher castes. When Brahmins conducted pujas for Manasa and Dharma Thakur, they increased their control over the lower caste population and added to their income in the process.[105] The mangalkavyas' praise for patient suffering and submission to a higher order was compatible with the maintenance of the existing social order. Finally, being the victims of coercion was not a state unique to the lower castes. High caste people also suffered from arbitrary authority and other misfortunes and could identify with Chando, the merchant, and Lausen, the feudatory chief, who were victimized. So the worship of Manasa and Dharma Thakur, while remaining most widespread among the lowest castes, penetrated the middle and high castes, as their stories entered the literary tradition and as Brahmin priests conducted parts of their ritual cycles.

Kali was another Bengali deity associated with violence and coercion, whose worship was spread more evenly through all social strata. Although she does not force people to worship her, she reels around out of control, drooling blood, decapitating her enemies, threatening to destroy the universe. It is particularly interesting that worship of this unpredictable, terrifying goddess spread so rapidly in the eighteenth century when Bengal's political life was turning chaotic and violent. Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia is said to have introduced public worship of Kali, threatened to punish

[104] Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 33, 41–42, and 324–25. Also, A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly*, pp. 197–98 and 201, and *WBDG: Bankura*, pp. 210–12 and 220–21.

[105] Pandit Hara Prasad Sastri wrote in the Bengal Census Report of 1901 that "all the lowest forms of worship rejected by the Brahmans gradually rallied around Dharma, and his priests, throughout Bengal, enjoy a certain consideration, which often excites the envy of their highly-placed rivals, the Brahmans, who though hating them with a genuine hatred, yet covet their earnings wherever these are considerable, and there are instances in which the worship of Dharma has passed into Brahman hands and has been, by them transformed either into a manifestation of Siva or of Vishnu." Quoted in A. Mitra, *Census 1951, West Bengal. The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal* (Alipore, 1953), p. 217.

his subjects if they did not worship her,[106] and patronized the most popular author of devotional hymns to Kali. This was Ramprasad Sen (1718–75) who had been a writer or accountant for the manager of a zamindari before devoting himself to poetry in simple language with rustic images.[107] Ramprasad "sees in Kali the world revealed in all its harsh, indifferent, seemingly capricious aspects, and a constant theme in his poetry is petulant complaint to this 'stoney-hearted' deity."

Yes, Mother, to some you have given wealth, horses, elephants, charioteers, conquest. And the lot of others is field labour, with rice and vegetables. Some live in palaces, as I myself would like to do. O Mother, are these fortunate folk your grandfathers and I no relation at all?

Some wear shawls and comfortable wrappers, they have sugar and curds as well as rice. Some ride in *palkis* (palanquins), while I have the privilege of carrying them.

Mother, through what grain land of yours have I driven my plough?

Prasad says: If I forget you, I endure the burden of grief that burns. Mother, my desire is to become the dust of those Feet that banish fear.[108]

Ramprasad's lyrics seemed to say that no human agency would lift the randomness, inequality, ceaseless exaction, and fear of the material world–only loving surrender to the goddess, who would be protective and maternal if approached correctly, could do that.

Coercion and British reforms

Few Europeans in Bengal in the middle decades of the eighteenth century found anything remarkable in the detentions and controlled beatings commonly used in rural areas. Europeans beat their own servants[109] and they took if for granted that Indian superiors would whip their inferiors. When the Nizamat Adalat (criminal court under the puppet nazim at Murshidabad) passed a death sentence on one Khan Muhammad "for beating his slave girl so that she died," Warren Hastings reviewed the sentence and decided the accused should be acquitted on the grounds that "it does not appear that there was any intention of murder and Mahomedan Law as well as our admits of moderate correction to a slave or even a hired servant."[110] An officer in the Company's offices was acquitted of murder

106 David R. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krsna, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley, CA, 1975), pp. 99–100. Gopal Singha, raja of Bishnupur, 1720–45, is still remembered for compelling his subjects to perform Vaishnava rituals. Abhaya Pada Mallik, *History of Bishnupur-Raj (An Ancient Kingdom of West Bengal)* (Calcutta, 1921), p. 52.

107 Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, p. 115.

108 Quoted from Edward J. Thompson and Arthur Marsham Spencer (tr.), *Bengali Religious Lyrics, Sakta* (Calcutta, 1923). pp. 34–35, in ibid., pp. 116–17.

109 H.E. Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (4th edn., London, 1908), pp. 131–36.

110 Majumdar, *Justice*, p. 316.

after he flogged a man to recover a debt and the victim consequently died. The officer had argued in his defense that the flogging was "justifiable or at least excusable from the common practice of the country."[111]

Thus initial British attitudes to physical chastisement were not notably different from those prevalent in Bengal. Although Company servants commented on instances of what they considered as cruel behavior, many also said in general Bengalis were a gentle, mild-mannered people. A common British view was that Bengalis were so peaceful or timid that they submitted to oppression without complaint. James Rennell, for example, said "the Bengall People certainly suffer Pain and misfortune with much greater Philosophy than Europeans do."[112] An early nineteenth-century observer felt that Bengali parents treated their children too indulgently. While "the Bengalee school-masters punish with a cane, or a rod made of the branch of a tree," Bengali children were "seldom corrected" by their parents, "and having none of the moral advantages of christian children, they ripen fast in inequity, and among the rest in disobedience to parents."[113]

The Company at the start of its administration was pragmatic rather than reformist and relied on bodily pain when other measures failed to realize the revenue. The Company's investment from the 1760s depended on the land revenue, and collection of the revenue would have been impossible without coercion. In 1764, Burdwan officers were ordered to imprison and confiscate the belongings of those revenue farmers and their securities in arrears. "If these means prove ineffectual, and it should appear it will answer the end intended," they shall be punished "with stripes." These are "the punishments in zemindarys."[114]

In similar manner, the zamindars' subordinates were permitted until the 1790s to send peons to detain and whip their tenants although periodically they were ordered to obtain administrative permission from zamindari or Company authorities before doing so. Company servants were not of a single mind about coercion. When the highest Company officials assumed administrative control in the 1750s and 1760s, much of their outrage over the misuse of power was directed towards British merchants and revenue collectors who used force broadly to procure the investment, control the population in the neighborhood of their *aurangs* (places of manufacture; depots), and pursue their private trading and money-lending interests. Warren Hastings denounced the mer-

[111] Letter to Court of Directors, 31 March 1773, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. VII, *1773–1776* (Delhi, 1973).
[112] Percival Spear, *The Nabobs: A Study of the Social Life of the English in 18th Century India* (London, 1963), p. 196.
[113] Ward, *View*, vol. I, pp. 110 and 120–21.
[114] Progs. of 26 Jan. 1764, James Long (ed.), *Selections from Unpublished Records of Government* (2nd edn., Calcutta, 1973), article 753.

chants-turned-collectors as "devils" who still monopolized trade through their banians and committed "oppression on the people and an obstruction of the Revenue." The oppression he referred to was "the practice assumed by every European, and the servant of every European, of arresting the person of the inhabitants, placing peons [guards] upon their houses, seizing boats and inflicting punishments in their own houses many times to a shocking degree of barbarity."[115]

The participation of Company servants in judicial and administrative decisions affecting land revenue probably diminished the incidence of torture but physical coercion was still common, even routine. In 1775, the Burdwan Provincial Council reported "it has been usual to punish the Vakeels of the principal Farmers in notorious cases of failure in the payment of rents, first by placing Mohussils [peons] over them, the next gradation is by Imprisonment," and then by "corporal punishment."[116]

In 1777, the experiment with collecting revenue through temporary revenue farmers instead of hereditary zamindars was terminated. Complaints of violence were less frequent in the next decade and a half. The restored zamindars possessed a greater natural authority than the temporary farmers and may have had less need to employ coercion. They also had better means of preventing complaints from reaching Company officers and courts in the district headquarters. And few Company revenue officers, who had no illusions that the revenue could be obtained without coercion, encouraged such complaints. Expediency prevailed over the principle of providing security of persons when the principle jeopardized the collections. This became evident when the Supreme Court, established in Calcutta under the Regulating Act of 1773, first claimed jurisdiction over non-Europeans in Bengal and then extended the doctrine of *habeas corpus* to Indians. Subordinates of zamindars quickly learned to apply for writs of *habeas corpus* to challenge the customary forms of detention used in rent collection. Reviewing a dozen such complaints made by farmers and underfarmers in the Burdwan zamindari, the raja's diwan replied that "when Compulsion is offered to any Person in the Mofussil, they threaten with Habeas Corpus, and Damages," and "withholds what is justly due from him." The diwan argued that "such Processes can never suit with the Inhabitants of Bengal" who were accustomed to using "severities" first and only then filing complaints with government officers.[117]

The government of Bengal strenuously objected to the Supreme Court's

[115] Monckton Jones, *Hastings in Bengal*, pp. 158 and 258–59.
[116] Burdwan PCOR to GG, 3 Nov. 1775, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 3 Nov. 1775, vol. II.
[117] Petition from Kali Prasad Singh, diwan of the Burdwan zamindari, Report from the Committee on Petitions Relative to the Administration of Justice in India, 8 May 1781, General app. no. 26, pp. 167–68.

extension of jurisdiction over Indians and even more to the application of British jurisprudence to revenue-collection matters. These issues came to a head in 1780 when the Supreme Court sent armed men to arrest the raja of Cossijura in Midnapur district for a debt claim. The Board of Revenue, denying the Court's jurisdiction, dispatched a large body of sepoys who arrested the Supreme Court's party and issued a public notice informing zamindars they were not under the Court's authority. A Parliamentary Act of 1781 resolved the conflict by exempting revenue administration from the Court's purview.[118] Private detention and chastisement of rent defaulters continued.

After the restoration of collection through zamindars in 1777, the Company itself detained the principal revenue payers in arrears. These revenue payers in much of western Bengal were now a relatively small number of major zamindars rather than a large number of temporary farmers. Because of the major zamindars' high status, the Company made special arrangements to protect their dignity. An example from neighboring Bihar illustrates this. Raja Kheali Ram, naib to Maharaja Kallian Singh, the Company's diwan at Patna, was arrested for arrears on his zamindari in 1781 and kept under house arrest at first. When he failed to respond to this mild duress, he was removed to the Company's fort at Patna and provided "with proper apartments." Then his confinement was made still "more rigorous" by shifting him to less spacious quarters, permitting him only one servant, and denying him a "hooka and betle, or similar indulgences to those he has hitherto enjoyed" in the fort. The Company also ordered the sale of "all his effects...including his house and palanquin" and the placing his two sons "under restraint of Mohassils."[119] Similar indulgences, followed by escalation of pressure, were used with zamindars in Bengal proper.

Revenue farmers and other intermediaries beneath the zamindars also continued to detain and beat their dependents. Officials normally intervened only when unusual cruelty or a pattern of gross unfairness was brought to their attention, as when a tenant or criminal suspect died as a result of torture, or when tenants revolted, as in Rangpur in 1783. The cruelest cases of torture more often involved criminal suspects than tenants in arrears although people in both categories were tortured here and there. In 1790, the Company tried Brindaban Bysack, the zamindar of a village whom witnesses said had arrested a man, Ram Hari, suspected of having purchased stolen goods from thieves. Brindaban detained Ram for fifteen days, trying to make him confess to being a receiver. When he refused, Brindaban was said to have had a *paik* (armed attendant) stand on Ram Hari's hands while another drove a nail under his thumbnail.[120] In

118 Dodwell (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, vol. V, pp. 240–47.
119 Reginald Hand, *Early English Administration of Bihar, 1781–1785* (Calcutta, 1894), pp. 19–22.
120 Justice Hyde's Notes, vol. 11, 24 Dec. 1790, *Rex* v. *Brindabun*.

another case, after the turn of the century, several government employees in Burdwan district were convicted and given prison sentences for "seizing, beating and torturing" Manik Suri and Kasinath Thakur on "a groundless suspicion" that they had stolen three boxes containing Rs. 2,300 worth of jewels and money. Manik Suri died seven months later, as a result of a ruler being thrust "up the fundament" to make him confess.[121] These examples were typical in that restraint and corporal punishment were still used widely, without government sanction. These cases also illustrate that as more British officers were willing to listen to such complaints and when courts were placed within reach of rural victims of unsanctioned violence, a growing number of people utilized the opportunity to seek official protection.

Not only did local notables continue to apply customary forms of coercion, so did the Company's Indian employees when they were directed to collect directly from estates taken from zamindars in arrears. A Company naib in charge of Swaruppur in the Rajshahi zamindari told J.H. Harrington in 1778 that when arrears were due, he sent peons to summon the head raiyats to his headquarters "where after hearing any Complaints I oblige them to pay what is due and if necessary to borrow" from the *mahajans* (money-lenders). If they refused, he confined them or beat them "with the Rattan."[122] Thus, while the Company occasionally acted to moderate the use of violence in revenue collection from the 1770s, it depended upon physical coercion to make payments more punctual.

Then in the early 1790s, it instituted major changes in the forms of sanctioned coercion. Until this time, the human body, not an individual's property, was the object of most coercive processes designed to obtain money claimed. In 1792, the Company passed a regulation forbidding landholders from confining and physically punishing rent defaulters. Regulation XVII of 1793 empowered landholders to distrain and sell the crops and personal property of tenants in arrears, without need of a court order. This was a potent weapon in the hands of rent receivers, notwithstanding the stiff penalties provided for wrongful distraint and sales. And Regulation III of 1794 ended the government practice of imprisoning landed proprietors in arrears; hereafter, they would forfeit parts of their zamindaris, the sale proceeds of which would pay the arrears to government. The shift to making property rather than the body of debtors answerable for sums owed was a radical one. Coercion was not being eliminated but its approved forms were fundamentally altered.

The effect of the new regulations was much greater on people at the top and

121 Judge D. Campbell, Calcutta Court of Circuit, to Nizamat Adalat, 4 Dec. 1809, Jud. Prog. 2 of 22 Dec. 1809, JP, Crim., vol. 219.
122 Ray, *Change*, pp. 50–51.

middle of the rent-collecting hierarchy than at the bottom. In the villages, jotdars continued to use traditional means of coercion on their share-cropping sub-tenants with little fear of official interference. And there is little evidence to show whether Bengalis at any level preferred loss of property to detention and beatings. Few British Company servants were in doubt about *their* preference. By the turn of the century, a general British consensus had emerged that beatings were uncivilized. The Collector of Midnapur commented in 1802 on the ban on confinements and physical punishments.

> Formerly there was no such thing as collecting the revenues without personal chastisement. A whipping was considered a necessary part of a tehseeldar's [collector's] establishment; and a whip might very properly have been represented as the symbol of his office. Nor could the revenues have been collected without it. In those days, sales of land, and distress of crops were entirely unknown.[123]

While whipping declined (but certainly did not disappear), illegal confinement remained common. In one of the few efforts to estimate their frequency, a Judge and Magistrate in Dinajpur guessed in 1811 that on any given day in his district, 4,500 persons were wrongfully detained outside the Company's jail, which held 500 prisoners. Perhaps 500 were held illegally on suspicion of crimes, 1,000 for debts to mahajans (money-lenders), and 3,000 for arrears to their superior landholders.[124] The familiar expressions of local political authority in Bengal's rural society were personal, direct, aggregative, and discretionary within known cultural forms. The ability to coerce and punish one's own dependents was as integral to the exercise of power as the practices of beneficence and indulgence. British efforts to disaggregate, depersonalize, and codify authority faced an uphill battle. As legal reforms made the land held by zamindars and supra-village intermediaries effective security for debts, private coercion outside the village dwindled. But in the village, peasant holdings were rarely recognized by Company courts as saleable for the realization of debts until the middle decades of the nineteenth century.[125] In the village, private coercive ejectment and beatings continued.

[123] John Herbert Harrington, *An Elementary Analysis of the Laws and Regulations Enacted by the Governor General in Council in Fort William in Bengal* (3 vols., Calcutta, 1805–17), vol. III, pp. 514–15.

[124] W. Leycester, Dinajpur Judge and Mag., to SDA, 29 March 1811, BOR Misc. Prog. 106 of 7 June 1811, vol. 492.

[125] Kumar and Desai (eds.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II, p. 152.

5 Political gifts and patronage

Kingship wore multiple masks. Coercive in one context, beneficent in the next, rajas had numerous roles and ceremonies available in their repertoire to deter disobedience, induce compliance, and reward loyalty. While rajas preferred to delegate coercion, they liked to dramatize their own giving of pleasure. And as they exchanged gifts and distributed patronage, they drew on Hindu, Muslim, and British cultural models and sometimes mixed them in hybrid forms. In Hindu and Islamic normative texts, the gift was but slightly less central to political authority than coercion. These sources stressed the intrinsic, morale-enhancing value of beneficence although the practical goal of incorporating dependents gave added incentive. In the eighteenth century, political flux and the spread of commercialization and profit seeking brought new levels of calculation, instrumentality, and ambiguity to the exchange of presents. What had once been conveyed as gifts were being converted into payments, entitlements, and even extortions. The routinization and commercialization of the age were draining the political gift relationship of some, although by no means all, of its affective and ritual content.

Mughal India was a gift-giving society. Hindu and Islamic values encouraged the generosity and self-sacrifice that the surrender of something valuable entailed. A major motive for accumulating wealth was to obtain the benefits of parting with it. These benefits might be individual or social, spiritual or political, or all at the same time. Gifts made to recipients of special sanctity, such as a Brahmin, *alim* (Islamic learned man), temple, or *madrassa* (Islamic school), earned spiritual merit and social esteem. They also tended to incline the recipients to support the authority of the donor among the surrounding population. Communal feasts given on the occasion of sacred holidays and life-cyle celebrations had similar effects. The gift of food and other objects was a means of strengthening kinship ties, which in Bengal were not confined to people who shared "blood" or in-law relations. "One's own people" (*atmiya-swajana*) included blood relatives and in-laws but they also encompassed an "indefinite and open-ended" group of people who shared food, gifts, and land and were considered to be related by virtue of inhabiting the same household (as servants,

for example) or neighborhood, receiving initiation trom the same *guru*, or some other bond.[1]

The motive for making a gift, it has been argued, was never disinterested, never without an expectation of reciprocity. The donor always anticipated a return, whether in the form of higher spiritual standing in this life, a better after-life, reciprocal presents and favors, or more appreciative and loyal members of the community. But the return was ideally disassociated temporally from the act of giving. This imbued the gift with an aura of generosity and moral character which the explicit contract and market exchange lacked. Yet the gift was far from being the opposite of the contract for, like the contract, its offer and acceptance resulted in obligation. In fact, the political gift was a type of contract, a pledge of loyalty and incorporation that was nevertheless morally superior to the pure contract.[2] It was superior when it was "seen and experienced as an inaugural act of generosity, without any past or future, i.e., without *calculation*," when "the law of self-interest" seemed to be suspended.[3]

Gifts from persons holding and seeking political authority are the main concern here. Food, betel (*pan*), tobacco, clothes (khilats), money (nazr), and land were all given away. The gift of rights to the produce of land was most coveted, especially when exempt from payment of rent and/or revenue. Two categories of land were exempted from payment: *bazi zamin* or revenue-free land for which no service was required and chakaran or maintenance land for servants of the zamindars, the village, and the state.

Gifts played a special role in a segmented society with political communities fragmented at the higher levels. In the absence of an integrated state or a concept of common citizenship, the exchange of presents played a vital symbolic function in committing people to one another, in establishing or renewing political discourse. What Marcel Mauss wrote about the ceremonial occasions in which gifts were given in state-less societies is relevant to the uncertain, shifting conditions of our period:

> at these times men meet in a curious frame of mind with exaggerated fear and an equally exaggerated generosity... In these primitive and archaic societies there is no middle path. There is either complete trust or mistrust. One lays down one's arms, renounces magic and gives everything away, from casual hospitality to one's daughter or one's property. It is in such conditions that men, despite themselves, learnt to renounce what was theirs and made contracts to give and repay.[4]

[1] Inden and Nicholas, *Kinship*, pp. 88–89.
[2] Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 5–25.
[3] Quoted from P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 171, in ibid., p. 12.
[4] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, tr. Ian Cunnison (New York, 1967), p. 79.

Mughal India, of course, was neither "primitive" nor state-less and few people gave "everything away." Yet in periods of political instability, superiors and their dependents did exchange the customary gifts in "a curious state of mind." Behind the etiquette of generosity and spontaneity, anxious calculations of self-interest determined when to give and how much to part with. Frequently, the political gift, which bound people morally, immediately preceded the entry into or renewal of a formal contractual relationship such as appointment to collect the revenue or perform some other bureaucratic task. Such a political gift was quickly repaid and thus tended to lose part of its gift quality. But so potent was the symbolism of the gift, its form persisted even when *quid* instantly followed the *quo*. The gift exchange announced the culturally normative relationship of the follower to the leader, of the inferior to the superior.

To the extent that gifts secured loyalty or favors, gifts were reciprocal. However, at the imperial and provincial levels, the material value of presents exchanged was usually not equal. At these upper levels, in balance the real transfer of moveable property was upward in the political system. The token small gift given by the political leader to his dependent seemed as if it was intended to mask the extractive, exploitive character of the Mughal and British fiscal systems.[5]

The zamindar in Bengal was the fountainhead of land gifts and local patronage. He granted rent-free shares of the agricultural surplus to a major portion of the elites in his territory. The large zamindar and his officers also appointed thousands of persons to conduct the police, judicial, revenue, and military functions of his territory. The raja of Burdwan, for example, had eight judicial and revenue *daftars* or offices at his capital, revenue-collecting kacharis in each pargana, and eight forts to staff. He endowed, built, and repaired numerous temples. The major zamindars seemed to vie with each other in demonstrating generosity, in attracting noted poets and scholars to their courts, in the distinctiveness of their temples, and in their patronage of the centers of Sanskrit scholarship at Bansberia, Guptipara, Nabadvip, Tribeni, and other places near the Bhagirathi river. The rajas of Burdwan never matched Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia's reputation for patronizing poets and scholars but the list of persons associated at various times with the Burdwan court was nevertheless impressive and included Ghanaram Chakravarti, author of *Dharmamangala* (1713);[6] Baneswar Vidyalankar, poet, legal scholar, and one of the most learned men of the mid-eighteenth century;[7] Raghunath Ray (1750-1836), a religious song-

[5] This point is suggested by discussion by Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, IL, 1972), pp. 133–35.

[6] Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, p. 13.

[7] A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly*, p. 680.

writer;[8] and Kamalakanta-Dasa, Vaishnava song-writer and compiler of *Padaratnakara* (1806).[9] The Burdwan rajas also endowed a major *math* (monastic institution of Hindu ascetics) in the Rajganj section of Burdwan town and claimed a right to take "the leading part in the election" of the head *mahant* (leader of the monastic order) when the mahants of the outlying, subordinate maths met to choose a successor to the *gadi* (throne). In the mid-nineteenth century, the value of the math's property was stated to be close to Rs. 18 lakhs.[10]

Some zamindars were notably catholic in selecting the objects of their beneficence, as if to impress their subjects, and sometimes the nazims in Murshidabad, with their incorporating broad-mindedness. The raja of Burdwan, for example, conferred land on a Sufi pir (teacher) in Kalyanpur in modern Howrah district who had impressed the raja with his super-human powers.[11] The Burdwan rajas also maintained the *darga* (tomb) of a famous pir, Bahram Sekka, in Burdwan town. The Muslim raja of Birbhum, on the other hand, donated 360 *bighas* (one bigha equals one third of an acre) of land to maintain the *sripat* (Vaishnava seat) of a noted descendant of one of Chaitanya's twelve companions, at Muluk near Bolpur.[12]

Hindu attitudes towards gift-giving in Mughal Bengal were shaped by caste custom, Hindu mythology, Hindu legal codes as refracted through the learning of Brahmins and other educated people, as well as by Mughal administrative practices. This chapter begins with a discussion of specifically Hindu attitudes towards prestations because chronologically they were primary and because land gifts by Hindu zamindars, which were a central feature of the revenue system, derived more from Hindu than Mughal or Islamic sources.

Hindu gifts

To say that Hindu writings on gifts are numerous would be an understatement. Manu and others listed the religious goals that were most appropriate for each of the four *yugas* (ages) and said that gifts were for the present *Kali-yuga*. (Austerities, metaphysical knowledge, and sacrifices were associated respectively with the three earlier yugas.)[13] The Santiparva and Anushasanaparva

8 Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, p. 606.
9 Sukumar Sen, *A History of Brajabuli Literature Being a Study of the Vaisnava Lyric Poetry and Poets of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1935), p. 345.
10 *Greedharee Doss* v. *Nundokissore Doss*, Mohunt, 17 and 19 July 1867, in Edmund F. Moore, *Reports of Cases Heard and Determined by the Judicial Committee, and the Lords of His Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council, on Appeal from the Supreme and Sudder Dewanny Courts in the East Indies* (14 vols., Calcutta reprint, 1915), vol. XI, pp. 249–65.
11 A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly*, pp. 587–88.
12 D. Majumdar, *WBDG: Birbhum* (Calcutta, 1975), p. 573.
13 Kane, *History*, vol. II, pt. II (Poona, 1941), p. 837.

sections of the *Mahabharata* contain lengthy, frequently cited discussions of *dana* (gifts), as do the *Agni*, *Matsya*, and *Varaha Puranas*. Legal scholars prepared at least half a dozen digests on the subject of dana.[14] The twelveth-century jurist Apararka quoted a verse which summed up the importance of gifts: "two persons should be drowned in water after tying around their neck a large stone, viz. a rich man not making gifts and a poor man who is not a *tapasvin* (who undergoes austerities or who is restrained)."[15]

Generosity thus was a principal obligation of an affluent Hindu's dharma. Bengali Hindus related all actions to the four ends of existence which in ascending order of value were: *kama* (pleasure), *artha* (wealth, advantage), dharma (moral obligation), and *mukti* (liberation from rebirth). All Hindus were obliged to pursue the first three ends (*trivarga*), the lower of which had to be sought in order to achieve the next. Therefore, moral obligations could not be fulfilled without wealth, and wealth could not be obtained without the family which was a by-product of sexual pleasure.[16] Generosity was the particular obligation of the householder. Among householders, the raja, with his superior resources and his responsibility to uphold moral order, was the premier gift-giver.

The ruler who gave presents to textually approved recipients was upholding dharma. Bengalis distinguished between three ranked categories of "activities and substances" according to their closeness to or distance from universal dharma. The highest activities were *sattvik* or those associated with dharma. *Sattvik* activites included "self-control, forbearance, discrimination, truthfulness," generosity, and worship. *Rajasik* activities were the morally neutral ones involved in normal temporal activities. *Tamasik* activities were lowest and included violence, sex, and hunger.[17] The raja, like other individuals, combined all three categories in his behavior. But the raja's appropriate gifts[18] were *sattvik*, ones that encouraged worship and moral guidance for his subjects.

Bengalis tended to associate the gifts they made to social superiors with puja (worship), perhaps the most *sattvik* activity of all. The individual inherited rank (jati, *kula*) but believed that his or her actions would elevate or lower that rank without one's own life-span. In its most general sense, puja means "honor or respect, an act of offering something to someone." Gods are the most common objects of puja. Akos Ostor, describing his observations in contemporary

[14] Ibid., p. 841.
[15] Ibid., p. 845.
[16] Ronald B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal* (New Delhi, 1976), pp. 84–85.
[17] Davis, *Rank and Rivalry*, pp. 74–78.
[18] Inappropriate gifts included those to unworthy recipients and those which disabled the donor from supporting his family.

Bishnupur, found that people most frequently defined a puja with "an analogy between the service of a deity and the treatment of a guest." In most Bishnupur pujas, small as well as large, sixteen separate items including food, water, and cloth are offered to the deity.[19] The gifts with which Bengalis worshiped the gods were homologous with those they used to honor human superiors, such as their gurus and priests. Both the act of honoring a natural superior and the act of sacrificing something of value were considered meritorious and both added to an individual's rank or "embodied substance." Thus, rank was nourished by the constant exchange of resources, whether in the form of food or wealth ("the source of food") or brides.[20] What a person ate, gave away, and received were simultaneously a determinant and a measure of his or her rank.

Ethnographic descriptions of Bengali villages and towns demonstrate how pervasive puja activities, including gifts to deities, were among all Hindu social strata. The ubiquity of complex ritual cycles for the worship of dozens of deities leave little doubt about the partial hegemony of the notion that human welfare depended upon the repeated gifts to and honoring of the gods.[21] The ideology of puja was spread to non-literate villagers through public readings of and/or discussions about "great tradition" texts such as the *Manu Dharmashastra*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Bhagavata Purana*.[22] As a result of this exposure to upper caste culture and of their observations of the working of local society, low and high status villagers alike understood how political power and the hierarchy of puja activities were intertwined, with the king and other givers of gifts ranked higher than the human receivers, with the exception of the anomolous Brahmins.

Classical Hindu sources particularly enjoined rajas to give gifts of money and land to learned Brahmins, many of whom performed Vedic rites. The texts treated Vedic sacrifices (*yajna*) as "the ultimate source of the power to bring about order and well-being." As the chief sacrificer (*yajamana*) of his realm, the king's responsibility was to ensure that Brahmins conducted sacrifices for the health and prosperity of his subjects. Theoretically, the king's powers of coercion depended on and were secondary to the Brahmin's performance of the sacrifice.[23] The texts described a raja's gifts to a Brahmin as a sacrifice (*yajna*) in itself. By the eighteenth century, Brahmins in Bengal were much more likely

19 Akos Ostor, "Puja in Society: A Methodological and Analytical Essay on an Ethnographic Category," *The Eastern Anthropologist*, vol. 31, no. 2 (April-June 1978), pp. 123–25.

20 Inden, *Marriage and Rank*, pp. 86–87.

21 See Lal Behari Day, *Bengal Peasant Life* (new edn., London 1878); Tara Krishna Basu, *The Bengal Peasant from Time to Time* (Calcutta, 1962); Gouranga Chattopadhyay, *Ranjana: A Village in West Bengal* (Calcutta, 1964); and Akos Ostor, *The Play of the Gods: Locality, Ideology, Structure and Time in the Festivals of a Bengali Town* (Chicago, IL, 1980).

22 Davis, *Rank and Rivalry*, p. 46.

23 Inden, *Marriage and Rank*, p. 52.

to offer puja to material representations or images of deities than to perform Vedic sacrifice to *invisible* gods in the atmosphere.[24] But in high caste conceptions, the interdependent roles of the local king and Brahmin remained much the same because puja was now "often equated with Vedic worship (*yajna*) and service". The foods donated to deities and Brahmins were distributed to upper caste devotees as sanctified left-overs that were considered equal to "the powerful coded substance of the Veda itself."[25] In consequence, high caste Hindus continued to view the king's gifts to Brahmins as necessary for social welfare and dharmic existence. Without such gifts, "order and prosperity" would collapse.[26] Moreover, low caste Hindus were more likely in medieval Bengal than earlier to be conscious of the king's patronage of Brahmins and temples since many pujas at which Brahmin's officiated were open to them whereas Vedic sacrifices had been closed. Altogether, the gifts of the raja-zamindar nourished the ritual life which was so essential to rural society.[27]

The relationship between the king and the Brahmin has presented special problems for scholars interested in identifying the organizing principle in Hindu constructions of hierarchy. Those who see the social system revolving around the Brahmin and Brahmanical principles that oppose purity and impurity have not convinced their colleagues that the purity–impurity dichotomy is the major determinant of social relations. The latter group point to the pivotal position of the king in the larger society and of the dominant peasant caste in village society.[28] The view accepted here is that "power and wealth, rather than purity and impurity, are the chief bases for social hierarchy" and that "religious institutions are fundamental features of the political system. Kings derive much of their power from worship, and bestow their emblems and privileges in a cultural atmosphere that is permeated by the language and attitudes of worship."[29]

Rajas in Bengal had given gifts to induce learned Brahmins to settle in their territory at least since the mythical arrival of the first Rarhi Brahmins in the eleventh century. At that time, Adisura, king of Bengal, had sent to north India for five Brahmins who brought the Veda and five "devoted" Shudras to Bengal. After Adisura questioned the Brahmins and watched them perform Vedic worship, he gave "villages, gold, cows, clothes, and so forth to the twice-born

[24] Ibid., p. 30.
[25] Ibid., p. 91.
[26] Ibid., p. 52.
[27] See Heesterman, *Inner Conflict*, pp. 36ff, and David Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton, NJ, 1985), pp. 23–24.
[28] See especially Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago, IL, 1988).
[29] Nicholas B. Dirks, "The Original Caste: Power, History and Hierarchy in South Asia," in McKim Marriott (ed.), *India through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi, 1990), pp. 60–61.

as their honorarium (*daksina*). And so all the Brahmans and Sudras settled here in this country."[30] Adisura had formed an alliance with the Brahmins who hereafter guided the raja and his subjects in the proper performance of their respective duties. Important classical Hindu texts exempted Brahmins from taxation,[31] extolled gifts of land as "the most meritorious,"[32] and declared that the donor would secure all the benefits of the sacrifices and rites the gift made possible.[33]

In the Mughal period, both Mughal rulers and zamindars tolerated old exemptions and granted new ones to Brahmins. Today, former dependents of the rajas of Bishnupur, Burdwan, and Nadia say that these rajas intended that no Brahmin in their territory be without a gift of land.[34] Each may have made good his intention. Apparently, the small zamindari grants of land to Brahmins, called *brahmottar*, did not reduce the total demand of a village. Rather, the demand was redivided among the remaining inhabitants or, if the land granted had been uncultivated, the demand was left the same. It is not clear if Bengali Brahmins were paid to persuade them to accept land gifts. To accept a gift implied dependence and inferiority. In some areas of India, donors induced Brahmins to accept gifts of land by first giving them a piece of gold.[35]

Land was often alienated to endow temples and the pujas performed in them. This land was called *debottar*. The *sebait* or temple custodian did not always or perhaps usually spend the land's total income on religious activity and physical maintenance so that these grants became a source of income for the *sebait*. *Sebaits* often hired low-paid *pujaris* (temple priests) to conduct temple rites.[36] Debottar land was hereditable but unlike brahmottar, was not alienable. After the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and the extension of the civil court system, landholders created debottar alienations as a device to protect their estates from attachment for debts. Money-lenders were reluctant to attach land that had been given to a goddess.

Village artisans and specialists who helped in village rituals also received lands with reduced rental obligation. These were not as common in Bengal as in many other parts of India but nineteenth-century accounts indicated that *jajmani*-type arrangements still existed in some areas. A general account of Bengal's villagers in 1874 said that "when the village is one in which the

30 Inden, *Marriage and Rank*, pp. 57–58.
31 Kane, *History*, vol. II, pp. 143–45, and vol. III, p. 194.
32 Ibid., vol. II, pt. II, p. 858.
33 Ibid., p. 857.
34 For example, see Mahendra Nath Gupta, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of Certain Government and Temporarily-Settled Estates and Zamindari Estates in the District of Hooghly, 1904–13* (Calcutta, 1914), p. 28.
35 Winks, *Land and Sovereignty*, pp. 228–29.
36 J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Introduction to Modern Hindu Law* (Bombay, 1963), pp. 496–98.

zamindar resides, it will often be the case that the barber who shaves the members of his family, the *dhobi* who washes for them, the head *darwan* (or porter) and other principal servants, all hereditary, hold their portion of the village land at relatively low rents or even rent free, in consideration of their services."[37] W.W. Hunter, while discussing Burdwan district in the 1870s, said the *kamar* (blacksmith) who sacrificed goats, the *napit* (barber) who assisted in ceremonies, the *mali* (gardener) who made garlands for festivals no longer held alienated maintenance lands[38] but his accounts of Bankura (formerly Bishnupur) and Birbhum stated that in some villages blacksmiths, barbers, gardeners, potters, and carpenters still held rent-free land for their ritual services and in some cases for serving the zamindar or his gomashta.[39]

Rajas also gave uncultivated land to Brahmins and non-Brahmins in order to bring it under the plough, induce more people to settle in their territory, and ultimately increase their revenue and number of dependents. These grants, in contrast to religious gifts to Brahmins and temples, were limited by conditions meant to prevent the erosion of the rajas' income. These land-clearing grants might consist of half revenue-paying and half revenue-free land, of revenue-free land that would become revenue-paying after a fixed period, or of land with a permanently low rent. The permutations were numerous. Again, in contrast to religious gifts, land-clearing grants were often subjected to a state tax, at a lower rate than ordinary revenue land.

Raja Tejchandra of Burdwan, when challenged by the Company's government in 1791 about the existence of low-rent tenancies in his zamindari, responded with a revealing explanation of their origin. He said that in pre-British times, "it was customary for men of family & consequence, both Hindoos & Mussulmans, to travel a great deal through the Country & the Zemindars in those days were of opinion that if they could prevail on men of Rank to stay in the District it would greatly benefit the object of Cultivation." In Burdwan, low-rent grants intended to bring fallow land under the plough were called *a'imma* (literally, plural of *imam* or Islamic religious leader but extended in Mughal usage to cover revenue-free or low-revenue tenures, given to religious and other leaders). Raja Tejchandra said that Nazim Shaista Khan (1664-77 and 1680-88) had introduced a'imma grants into Bengal to encourage cultivation and that, although it was "the general policy," the raja's ancestors had utilized the policy "particularly." A'imma grants were resumable by the raja of Burdwan

37 J.B.P., "Rustic Bengal," *Calcutta Review*, vol. 59 (1874), p. 200.

38 Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. IV, p. 66.

39 Ibid., pp. 243–45 and 368–69. Also see Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, pp. 231 and 525, and vol. II, p. 127, and Tarasish Mukhopadhyay, "The Jajmani Relationship in Rural West Bengal," in Alexander Lipski (ed.), *Bengal East and West* (East Lansing, MI, 1969), pp. 139–49.

on failure to produce an heir. Since Shaista Khan's time, the state had taxed a'imma land at the reduced rate of Rs. 1 for three bighas.[40]

Another kind of alienation designed to promote economic development was the exemption of land when it was converted into a tank (pond). The zamindar of Birbhum, for example, charged Rs. 50-100 in salami (present) for digging a tank in malzamini (revenue-paying) land and required the grantee "to clear as much Waste land and pay for it at the Rate of the Lands appropriated to the Tank." This was a productive investment when the tank's owner irrigated his fields, stocked fish, and planted valuable trees on the tank's banks. The zamindar of Burdwan used a different arrangement for tanks. He also charged salami but he required an additional payment equal to nine years' rent, after which the land used for the tank became rent-free.[41]

A less common but significant type of alienation was the gift of revenue-free land to a raja's relatives, favorites, and employees. Often, these grants were made under the guise of debottar or land-clearing a'imma grants in order to give them greater legitimacy in the event of a government investigation. A marriage settlement sometimes included a land grant for a child-bride's father. Rajas rewarded loyal diwans with revenue-free grants. Gifts to a raja's relatives and zamindari employees were usually larger than those to Brahmins and might consist of whole villages. They were also more likely to be resumed when a raja found himself under state pressure for more revenue or when the holder displeased the raja. In the 1790s, Rani Bishnukumari of Burdwan filed a law suit to resume eighty-seven villages originally assessed at Rs. 60,000 but then granted by Raja Tejchandra for a rent of Rs. 15,062 to Raghunath Singh, a former friend and employee of Raja Tejchandra.[42]

Zamindars were not the only persons who alienated zamindari land. Few large zamindars supervised their amla closely. "The ignorance of the zamindars, and their great inattention to the management of the concerns for which they are responsible" was said to be "universal." Zamindari amla secretly exempted their masters' land as favors to their dependents and as sources of bribes to others in most estates in Bengal. Intermediaries managing the collections in subdivisions under the rajas did the same. The result was to increase the burdens on the non-exempt population who had to make up the defalcation on the exempted land.[43]

40 Raja Tejchandra to BOR, n.d., BOR Prog. of 16–30 Sept. 1791, vol. 120.

41 J. Sherburne. Birbhum Col., to BOR, 14 Feb. 1788, BOR, Misc. Prog. of 20–31 Aug. 1789, vol. 75.

42 *BLR*, pp. 655 and 730–36.

43 John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, paras. 174–86.

Mughal gifts

In Mughal theory, zamindars were not empowered to alienate land revenue. That was the emperor's (*badshah*'s) prerogative. In practice, the Mughals generally tolerated such alienations when they did not reduce the state's collections from the zamindari as a whole. When a zamindari changed hands, non-*badshahi* alienations were liable to resumption. The emperors themselves granted revenue-free land or land at a nominal revenue. These grants, resumable according to their deeds, were termed *madad-i ma'ash* (aid for subsistence) or a'imma. The *Ain-i Akbari* explained that Akbar, "from his desire to promote rank distinction, confers land and subsistence allowances on four classes of men." They resembled the recipients of Hindu land gifts. They were seekers of knowledge who had given up "worldly occupation"; self-deniers who had withdrawn from society; the "weak and poor"; and "honourable men of gentle birth who from want of knowledge are unable to provide for themselves by taking up a trade."[44]

The Mughal emperors, however, seem never to have alienated land on the same scale as the zamindars of eighteenth-century Bengal. Akbar initiated an inquiry into fraudulent grants made by his subordinates, resumed such grants, and ordered *madad-i ma'ash*-holders with more than 500 bighas to produce their documents for inspection.[45] The *Ain*'s statistics for *madad-i ma'ash* show that the alienations from the total state revenue varied from 5.4 percent in Delhi to 1.8 percent in Gujarat and Lahore. The *Ain* did not give figures for Bengal but Nazim Shaista Khan countermanded an order by his predecessor to resume non-*badshahi* grants in Bengal and permitted the retention of those grants if they did not amount to over 2.5 percent of the revenue in each jagir. In 1672-73, Aurangzib ordered the resumption of grants to Hindus but enforcement of the order was spotty.[46] Some notion of how much less frequently the Mughal state alienated land than the zamindars may be seen from an 1839 government estimate that fifty out of fifty-one rent-free grants in Bengal were non-*badshahi*.[47] In Burdwan district in the early 1870s, there were only 1,343 estates, covering about 2,26,000 bighas, that paid no revenue to government while 170,240 small plots, assessable by government, paid no rent to the zamindars. This represented an average of one rent-free plot for each 2.5 houses in the district.[48]

The Mughal government did assign much of the empire's territory as jagirs

44 [Allami], *Ain-i Akbari*, tr. Blochman, vol. I, p. 278.

45 Ibid., p. 279.

46 Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 311–16.

47 F.J. Halliday, Sec., Rev. Dept., to Landholders' Society, 15 Jan. 1839, BR Prog. 37 of 15 Jan. 1839, vol. 976.

48 Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. IV, pp. 1 and 77–78.

for the support of the mansabdars and their troops. But this was classified as *khiraj* (revenue-paying), not lakhiraj (without revenue). Moreover, in Bengal beginning with Murshid Quli Khan, the proportion of jagir land declined. How much land in Bengal was held free of either rental demand or government revenue demand? The most comprehensive survey in the eighteenth century was made by the Amini Commission of 1777. When its findings are combined with an earlier survey of Burdwan, the totals of alienated land are 45.25 lakhs of bighas of bazi zamin and 10.50 lakhs of bighas of chakaran. If we assume that similar proportions of land were alienated in the unsurveyed districts, with one quarter of the province's cultivated land, and that only one fifth of Bengal was cultivated, then 60 lakhs of bighas or 23.9 percent of the cultivated land may have been bazi zamin, and 14.0 lakhs of bighas or 5.6 percent may have been chakaran. James Grant guessed that another 7 lakhs of bighas or 2.8 percent were held revenue free as *nankar* (support land) by zamindars and qanungos.[49] Thus, by Grant's calculations in 1786, based largely on the Amini Commission survey of 1777, the total alienated land was 81.0 lakhs of bighas or an area equal to 32.2 percent of the area he guessed was cultivated in Bengal.[50] The percentages probably exaggerate the proportions of cultivated land that had been alienated because exempted land often contained uncultivated and scrub land[51] and in many districts rent-free holders cultivated a smaller part of their land than rent payers. Moreover, it is possible that much more than one fifth of Bengal's total area was cultivated. What may be said with confidence is that in the late Mughal and early British periods, landholders took advantage of lax state control to exempt large numbers of people from payment of rent and revenue.

While rent-free land was the characteristic gift of a zamindar to his dependents, the gift of a khilat was the usual way, apart from appointments and jagirs, the emperor or the provincial governor honored and incorporated his important subjects. Khilat was an Arabic word meaning "robe of honor" and it was used interchangeably with the Persian term *siropa* (literally, head to foot). It minimally consisted of a turban, a gown, and a girdle or sash. If the recipient was important enough, a second gown was added, the khilat was embroidered with gold, silver, and silk thread, and it was decorated with jewels.[52] In Bengal, nazims, mansabdars, and zamindars conferred khilats at the celebration of the

[49] The zamindars of Bengal received most of their income from a share of their collections, not from *nankar*. John Shore estimated that zamindari *nankar* "does not in the aggregate exceed one per cent in the revenues." Minute of 2 April 1788, p. 747.

[50] One fifth of 90,000 square miles = 18,000 x 1,396 bighas per square mile = 2,51,28,000 bighas of cultivated land. James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 269–72.

[51] See accounts of the bazi zamin or alienated lands of Vishnupur, Misc. Records, Rev. Dept., 54 volumes.

[52] Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, p. 15.

puniya, successions, and weddings, and on the occasion of delegating authority or making appointments. When an important zamindar died, the nazim sent his condolences and a khilat to the heir. If the successor was female, she was given shawls instead of a gown and turban. After a major zamindar's funeral, an adult male heir was presented to the nazim and received a khilat and a betel leaf. The heir was not given a farman or sanad confirming the succession until the deceased zamindar's arrears were adjusted and until the heir had paid *peshkash* (tribute) to the emperor and a nazr (gift) to the nazim. Often, the completion of these transactions took several years. If the succeeding zamindar was female, a minor, or of "secondary rank," the nazim deputed an officer to confer the khilat and give the betel.[53] By conferring a khilat, a ruler proclaimed his sovereignty and incorporated the recipient into the governing class; by accepting a khilat, a man acknowledged the donor's overlordship and pledged loyal service.

Mughal use of gifts of clothes to cement political bonds fit easily with indigenous beliefs about "the transformative and symbolic qualities of cloth." "Like ceremonial food offerings, donations of cloth to temple deities among Hindus or to saints' shrines among Muslims were appropriate because they could be redistributed after worship as sanctified substances."[54] Hindus gave cloth in a vast number of worship and life-cycle ceremonies. Cloth did not have as much potency as food to transfer purity or pollution, but it retained "'bio-moral energy' longer" and was used as gifts to Brahmins, temples, and dependents. By one mid-nineteenth-century estimate, only one fifth of India's "raw cotton production was sold as such in internal or external markets," while the rest was used in social, political, and ritual transactions.[55]

The significance of the khilat was in its symbolism for unlike the gift of land, the khilat's value was less in its material value than in its intrinsic meaning. Part of its meaning derived from the fact that the robes came from the personal wardrobe of, and in theory if rarely in reality might have been worn by, the donor. F.W. Buckler stressed the bodily contact involved. He argued that the khilat was a symbol of "continuity or succession" and that "that continuity rests on a physical basis, depending on contact of the body of the recipient with the body of the donor through the medium of the clothing. Or, to put it rather differently, the donor includes the recipient within his own *person* through the medium of his wardrobe."[56] Considering other examples of "corporeal trans-

[53] Charles William Boughton Rouse, *Dissertation concerning the Landed Property of Bengal* (London, 1791), pp. 232–36.

[54] C.A. Bayly, "The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700–1930," in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, p. 297.

[55] Ibid., pp. 301–02.

[56] F.W. Buckler, "The Oriental Despot," in *Legitimacy and Symbols: The South Asian Writings of F.W. Buckler*, ed. M.N. Pearson (Ann Arbor, MI, 1985), p. 179.

ferences" and "corporeal contact,"[57] including communal meals and the taking of a predecessor's widow or concubine, Buckler concluded that the Mughal and other "Eastern" kings stand

> for a system of rule of which he is the incarnation, incorporating into his own body, by means of certain symbolical acts, the persons of those who share his rule. They are regarded as being parts of his body, *membra corporis regis*, and in their district or sphere of activity, they are the King himself–not servants of the King but 'friends' or *members* of the King.[58]

Buckler's "organic" view of Mughal kingship fits the argument that "patrimonial domination originates in the patriarch's authority over his household" and that as the patriarch extends his authority over people who were not originally part of his household, the larger realm is still "conceived as a huge household."[59] High Mughal officers fed their Muslim friends, either by sending gifts of cooked food to their houses[60] or by eating communally. At a communal dinner, the master of house was said to sit at the northern end of a cloth spread on the floor with a dozen dishes for himself. Another four or so guests, sitting close to the host on either side, had similar assortments of dishes. "But below those four guests, the number of dishes go on diminishing in each assortment, until they reach the southern side; and there the number shrinks to two or three, and these too of an inferior sort very often, as being destined for people of a very different station."[61]

Common meals, then, like khilats could draw Muslims of various ranks into relations that may have had resonance with the hierarchical extended family. But what of Hindus? They accepted khilats–rejecting a khilat was regarded as a sign of treason[62]–but it is almost inconceivable that many Hindu officers and zamindars would have shared meals with Muslims. Would a Muslim look upon a Hindu zamindar who would not eat with him and who had to be coerced into paying his revenue as part of the same corporate group? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. The point is that there were multiple symbolic systems operating, one that encompassed relations between persons of proximate rank and culture and others that could bridge broader cultural and social distances, that would allow for the less familial acts of extraction and coercion and for the language of etiquette in which a petitioner to the emperor described himself as "the smallest

[57] The phrases are from M.N. Pearson's introduction to ibid., pp. 26–27, which is a valuable discussion of "the rites of incorporation."
[58] Ibid., p. 177.
[59] Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals," p. 79.
[60] Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, p. 135.
[61] Translator's note, ibid., p. 168.
[62] M.N. Pearson's introduction, Buckler, *Legitimacy and Symbols*, p. 25.

particle of sand" and addressed the emperor as "a Support and shade to all that inhabite the world."[63]

In the mid-eighteenth century, relations between the state and the zamindars of Bengal were becoming less "organic" and familial, despite the persistence of activies such as khilat-giving that implied kinship. Revenue farming had spread in late Mughal Bengal. The estates of many large zamindars had expanded through the money-oriented role of revenue farming. The rituals of incorporation could not disguise the financial motives that lay at the base of the extractive system. One piece of evidence that demonstrates the weakening of the kinship model was the fact that from Shuja-ud-din's reign (1727–39), at least, nazims charged zamindars for the cost of the khilats they distributed at the annual puniya. Shuja imposed a special abwab called *baha-i-khilat* for the purpose.[64] In other words, the conferral of khilats, on this occasion anyway, was no longer a free gift. East India Company officials converted the charge for khilats at the puniya into a major exaction. Whereas before the grant of the diwani to the Company in 1765, the nazims charged Rs. 83,000 for khilats, the Company charged over Rs. 2,67,000 annually from 1766 to 1770.[65] Subsequently, the Company ceased to hold the puniya or give annual khilats. But the practice of charging recipients for khilats spread to some zamindaris. A gomashta in Rangpur reported in 1786 that he was charged Rs. 188 for his khilat which he sold for Rs. 60. A government commission in Rangpur reported that year that

> we find it is the general custom throughout the country for the native to request Khelauts (Honorary dresses) on all public occasions from those invested with power and authority, particularly from a person newly entered into an office under whom they are to act, and that a compliment of superior value is made in return for such Honorary dresses.[66]

While khilats and communal feasts were given by superiors to inferiors, inferiors gave their superior a money gift, a nazr, which was "the counterpart of the *khil'at* and expresses the same relationship–the donor acknowledges the recipient as the source of all his wealth and being." An Arabic and Persian word which originally meant "a vow," nazr came in Mughal India to mean "an offering" or "a gift" because the vow was "always symbolically expressed in

63 John Russell. President of the English East India Company at Fort William, to Emperor Farrukhsiyar, 27 March 1713. C.R. Wilson. *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal*, (2 vols., London. 1895 and Calcutta. 1900), vol. II, pt. I, p. 111

64 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 210.

65 Fourth Report from the Committee of Secrecy Appointed to Enquire into the State of the East India Company, 1773, *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*. vol. IV, *East Indies–1772, 1773*, pp. 112–13. Hereafter cited as Fourth Report from the Committee of Secrecy, 1773.

66 Report of the Rangpur Commission, 23 March 1786, Sinha (pub.), *Maharaja Deby Sinha*, pp. 490–91.

gifts of the earth or stock, of coin, of a daughter in marriage."[67] Nazrs were most often coins. The Mughal mints produced gold coins that were largely used as presents for high-ranking officers.[68] Mughal emperors and nazims not only welcomed nazrs, they often demanded them. Men seeking imperial audiences, appointments, or promotions sent sizeable nazrs to the emperor and/or his principal officers and these "were in practice compulsory."[69] When a zamindar wanted his estate enlarged or his succession confirmed, presents were obligatory. Ramjiban was required to make three contributions when he became zamindar of Rajshahi in 1733: Rs. 8,17,000 for the emperor, Rs. 1,67,000 for the nazim, and Rs. 27,000 for certain provincial ministers. Because they equalled more than half of Ramjiban's ordinary annual revenue obligation, the payments were allowed to be made in installments over seven years.[70] When Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia refused the Rs. 12 lakh nazr demanded of him, Alivardi (nazim 1740–56) imprisoned him.[71]

Although emperors and nazims demanded nazrs as a matter of course, they periodically attempted to check the extortion of presents by lesser officials. Aurangzib's farman (order) to Rasikdas required him to see that "no Oppression may be exercised upon a single Ryot." To lessen the opportunity for present-giving, he was told not to see the *chaudhuris* (revenue collectors) and amins (temporary estate managers) "in private but make it a Rule for them to attend publicly in the Cutcherry."[72] Nazim Shuja-ud-din (1727–39) dismissed servants of government who demanded gratuities and rewarded the people who informed on them.[73] Such efforts had no lasting effect. Present-taking was so common that salaries of lesser officials were probably set with the understanding that they would supplement their income with nazrs and exactions. Presents to inferior and superior officers were so ordinary that they were institutionalized and recorded in zamindari sanads (patents) and in zamindari demands on subordinate revenue payers, as nazrana, abwabs, and other items. Nazrs had become a routine supplement to the land revenue.[74]

Frequently, though, presents were little more than extortions, exacted by the powerful from the weak, without being entered into any account or record but taken on the occasion of performing ordinary official duties or of an important event in a superior's life. Walter Clavell wrote that in Hughli in the 1680s, the

67 Buckler, "The Oriental Despot," p. 181.
68 Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 93.
69 W.H. Moreland, *From Akbar to Aurangzeb* (New Delhi, 1972, reprint of 1923 edn.), p. 271.
70 Calkins, "Revenue Administration," pp. 250–51.
71 Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 58.
72 Aurangzib's farman to Rasikdas, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 988.
73 Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, p. 324.
74 James Grant. "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 277.

faujdar compelled Indian merchants to buy goods from him at 10-15 percent higher than their market value and to give "small presents, at all feasts, his or his Sonns birth dayes, Circumcisions, Marriages, or his goeing to or coming from Dacca."[75] William Bolts estimated that zamindars paid the equivalent of 25 percent of their assessed revenue to Mughal officials and their agents to secure their "influence."[76]

Gifts and the British

From the time of their arrival in India, the British entered networks of gift exchange. As ambassadors and traders, Company employees traveled inland to the imperial courts, gave the expected nazrs, and obtained the farmans which allowed them to trade duty-free. Duty-free did not mean gift-free. European accounts from the seventeenth century usually treated the presents traders were asked for as extortion devoid of symbolic meaning. Officials from the petty *chaukidar* (local guard) on up asked European merchants to produce the documents which exempted them from duties and demanded payments suitable to their station. Numerous chaukidars stopped John Marshall in 1670 on his trip from Balasore through Bengal to Patna. Most were satisfied with a rupee.[77] Streynsham Master wrote in his diary at Hughli in 1679: "Here is noe order or Government. Every petty Officer makes a pray of us and abuscing us at pleasure to Screw what they can out of us."[78] The British believed that vexatious pressure on the factors and their commercial partners violated the imperial agreements under which they traded and they attempted to gain more latitude and respect by attacking the Mughals on both the eastern and western coasts in 1686. The military results were unimpressive but in 1696 the British received permission to build Fort William and two years later, after giving appropriate nazrs to the nazim and diwan of Bengal, they were allowed to buy the zamindari rights to the neighboring villages of Kalikata, Gobindapur, and Sutanuti. The East India Company had demonstrated that it had the military strength to interfere with the export trade if pushed too far.

The size and armed strength of the European merchant companies and the importance of their trade to the Indian economy gained them a measure of protection from the demands for presents. Indian traders were more vulnerable. Thomas Bowrey wrote that Nazim Shaista Khan "always kept in his court

[75] From "Mr. W. Clavell's Accompt of the Trade of Hugly," in [Hedges], *Diary of William Hedges*, vol. II, p. cxxxix.

[76] William Bolts, *Consideration on Indian Affairs; Particularly Respecting the Present State of Bengal and its Dependencies* (2nd edn., London, 1772), p. 161.

[77] Khan, *John Marshall in India*, pp. 63ff.

[78] Temple (ed.), *Diaries of Streynsham Master*, vol. II, p. 28.

Sharpe witted fellows that made it theire business to prye into the Estates of the Hindoo merchants." The nazim demanded a payment of Rs. 1,00,000 from Khemchand Shaw, a wealthy Balasore broker who traded with the British, and accepted Rs. 50,000. The faujdar of Cuttack also shook down Khemchand, detaining him until he paid Rs. 30,000. Bowrey commented that such happenings "have occasioned every house of any Esteeme to Entertain many peons." Khemchand employed fifty guards.[79]

British observations of exactions from merchants and their isolation from the courts of the nazim and zamindars probably created an exaggerated notion of the arbitrariness in the exchange of resources in eighteenth-century Bengal. Moreover, as the British began to look more closely at nawabi politics in the 1740s and 1750s, some behavioral standards were growing more fluid. In periods of political stability, the amounts demanded and given were usually limited by mutually recognized parameters of what was expected and what was possible. However, in transitions between regimes, when major changes in personnel and policy occurred, the usual conventions did not hold. This was particularly true of the middle decades of the eighteenth century, during the destructive Maratha invasions in Alivardi's reign (1740-56) and during the revolution effected by the English East India Company (1757-65). In this period, first the nazim's government and then the Company pressed unabashedly for payments beyond the customary presents, as normal constraints on conduct eroded.

During the Maratha invasions, the raiders took payments from some zamindars in return for not plundering their estates.[80] Alivardi, deprived of zamindari revenue in the western districts, found himself without the resources to pay his soldiers who began to plunder villages near Murshidabad. In desperation, Alivardi "began to fleece everybody, high and low, merchants, rajas and even his own relations." European merchants at Qasimbazar, near Murshidabad, reported in 1744 that "every person who was reputed to have money was seized and whipped until he disgorged his wealth while sums of 500 and 1000 rupees were taken from 'those who had not double the sum in the world.'"[81] The extortionate behavior of the nazim and his subordinates probably fed the growing perception that European factories offered more security than nawabi territory.[82] It also may have whetted European appetites for political power.

After Alivardi's death, the Europeans used what they had learned about the etiquette and symbolism of presents to influence the rapidly evolving course of

79 Bowrey, *Geographical Account*, pp. 154–56.
80 Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 70.
81 J.H. Little, "The House of Jagatseth," *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 22, no. 43–44 (Jan.–June 1921), pp. 10–13.
82 Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 118.

events. Both before and after Nazim Siraj-ud-daula's capture of Fort William in 1756, British and Dutch officers utilized signifiers of political fidelity in their relations with Siraj. These included the gift of a nazr, acceptance of khilats, and the exchange of betel (a customary pledge of honor).[83]

The British recovery of Fort William and defeat of Siraj-ud-daula at Plassey in 1756–57 demonstrated that the Company, not the nazim, was the dominant force in Bengal. As influential people in Bengal saw where their future opportunities lay, the net flow of presents shifted. The British quickly exploited their new advantages and proved themselves prodigious present-takers. They had the power to choose and displace nazims. They also assumed the right to exempt trade, both inland domestic and oceanic, from the nazim's duties. They distributed dastaks (duty-free passes) to their Indian servants and to others willing to give a present or the purchase price. The privilege of trading without paying duty gave dastak-holders a decisive price advantage in commercial competition. Nazim Mir Qasim complained that the agents of the Company servants took goods at a quarter of their real value and forced people to buy at five times the fair price.[84] From one point of view, the British were merely extending the practice of extorting presents, peddling influence, and setting up local monopolies. From another vantage point, they had usurped power from the Mughal governor and put their influence up for sale on a scale possibly unmatched by the preceding regimes.

Company employees came to Bengal in the hope of making a quick fortune and then returning to Britain. "Some enjoyed life in Bengal ... But the majority seemed to have disliked Bengal."[85] Mortality rates among Europeans were so high that the urge to exploit the new opportunities for making money after Plassey was compelling. Two-thirds of the Company's civilian employees who came out before Plassey died in India, as did 59 percent of those who came between 1757 and 1766. Roughly a quarter of the European soldiers "seem to have perished every year."[86] Faced with such grim odds, Company servants eagerly grasped at private trade and present-taking to supplement their official compensation from the Company.

By one estimate, Indians in Bengal made political gifts to the British worth £2,500,000 from 1757 to 1765,[87] or an annual average of Rs. 28.41 lakhs during those eight years.[88] The Company exacted an additional £3,770,833 as compen-

83 Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. I, pp. 54 and 251–52.
84 Translation of letter from the nawab to Governor H. Vansittart, May 1762, Vansittart, *Narrative*, p. 192.
85 P.J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1976), p. 214.
86 Ibid., p. 219.
87 Ibid., p. 179.
88 Calculations assume that a lakh of rupees was worth £11,000 before 1770 and £10,000 after.

sation for losses suffered in the upheavals in those years,[89] or an annual average of Rs. 42.85 lakhs. The combined payments for presents and restitution thus equaled Rs. 71.26 lakhs annually or 27.8 percent of the 1763 revenue demand. Much of this money left Bengal. Company officials probably sent a higher proportion of their private income out of Bengal than nawabi officials had. Peter Marshall estimated that individuals, as distinct from the Company itself, sent home some £15,000,000 from 1757 to 1784[90] or Rs. 52.91 lakhs annually. Presents, therefore, were a major component in a significant drain of wealth in the early decades of British rule.

Acceptance of such massive presents by Company employees was considered scandalous by Company directors and members of Parliament in London. Parliamentary investigations and legislation led in the early 1770s to a ban on the receipt of presents and to the discontinuance of the government's puniya, the most common occasion for giving nazrs. The Governor's Council in Calcutta assured the Court of Directors in 1774 that they agreed that the receipt of even "trifling presents...forms a precedent very liable to be extended and abused." The Council said (disingenuously) that it was refusing all presents and explaining its motives to Bengalis while giving "assurances of regard and other marks of respect according to the rank of the persons" offering presents in order not "to give them offence."[91] The Company continued to confer khilats on zamindars and other persons of importance upon occasion but the ban on receipt of presents and the suspension of the puniya curtailed the ceremonial interchange between the rulers and the major zamindars.

Resumptions of land and patronage

Restoring alienated land to the tax rolls was a much more direct attack on elite privilege than suppressing present-giving to government employees and was therefore a more prolonged and politically sensitive task. From its initial control of territory in Bengal, Company administrators were concerned that extensive areas paid no revenue to the state and that zamindars were making new, unauthorized alienations. In 1786, James Grant estimated that the amount of alienated land had doubled since the acquisition of the diwani in 1765, from 40 to over 80 lakhs of bighas.[92] With an area equivalent to almost one third of the estimated cultivated land[93] either paying no rent to the zamindars or no revenue

[89] Percival Spear, *The Oxford History of Modern India, 1740–1947* (Oxford, 1965), p. 75.
[90] Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 225.
[91] Letter to Court, 30 Nov. 1774, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. VII,*1773–1776*, p. 493.
[92] James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 228.
[93] Grant, ibid., p. 272, suggested that 18,000 square miles or 251.28 lakhs of bighas were cultivated.

to the state, resumption of improper alienations was a tempting means of increasing the Company's income. At least some Company employees thought the alienations reinforced "the natural or factitious indolence of the inhabitants of Hindostan" and that "a judicious spur in taxation" might "excite reasonable efforts of greater industry."[94] Resumptions, though, were constrained by political and administrative obstacles. To have assessed lands held by Brahmins and the *sebaits* (care-takers) of temples would have outraged popular sentiment as few other administrative acts and therefore was not a practical option.[95] To have resumed chakaran (service-land) holdings of village servants would have yielded little revenue since, while numerous, they were small. Moreover, most of the perhaps 150,000 holders did perform vital functions as village headmen, patwaris (record keepers), chaukidars, and paiks and other militia who escorted shipments of rents and revenue and guarded the frontiers.[96]

Officials repeatedly looked for unauthorized alienations to resume. Company policy was that revenue-free lands were resumable if granted without government permission since the grant of the diwani, since 1765. Grant-holders were required to prove the validity of their privileged tenures by producing their sanads. Beginning in 1772, government agreements with superior revenue payers specifically prohibited landholders from exempting people from rent without government permission. Nevertheless, revenue farmers and zamindars continued to issue many kinds of exemptions and government tried to resume them in their periods of direct management and close supervision. In 1782, John Shore proposed the creation of bazi zamin daftars (offices) in which all revenue- and rent-free grants would be registered. The number of claims submitted overwhelmed the staff assigned to the daftars. In Midnapur and Jellasore, 85,000 people registered documents; in Birbhum, over 10,000 did so.[97] Sanads were forged with old zamindari seals and made to look aged with the help of oil, dirt, and smoke.[98] The staff of the offices were believed to be "protecting fraudulent alienations" rather than exposing them. Accordingly, in 1793 the bazi zamin daftars were abolished.[99] Regulations of 1793 provided a new mechanism for registering alienated land. Again, more documents were deposited than could

[94] Ibid., p. 321.

[95] See John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 118. The Amini Commission discovered that Rani Bhawani of Nator (Rajshahi) had "fraudulently alienated" 4,29,149 bighas "to Brahmins, held for the most part collusively for her private benefit." They were not entirely resumed. James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 320.

[96] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 113, and James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 269–70.

[97] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, pp. 270–72.

[98] C.R. Blunt, Commissioner, Bishnupur, to Burdwan Col., 16 Jan. 1802, BOR Prog. 32 of 29 Jan. 1802, vol. 349.

[99] *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. I, p. 51.

be thoroughly examined. In Burdwan district alone, 99,000 sanads were delivered to government.[100] Most holders of rent- and revenue-free land retained their privileges although large, new alienations were resumed when discovered.

When James Grant estimated in 1786 that the area of alienated land may have doubled in the preceding two decades, he recommended broad resumptions. Other officials questioned whether wholesale resumptions would be wise economic policy. John Shore, for example, pointed out in 1789 that "it is a certain fact, that the zamindars are almost universally poor."[101] To have resumed their *nankar* (private support) lands would have further disabled them from paying their revenues. Shore also believed that in many districts, the Company's assessment was already so heavy that raiyats managed to pay zamindari demands only by cultivating rent-free lands.[102] Shore's views were seemingly confirmed by the general difficulty people had in meeting their obligations in the 1790s. Systematic resumption of illegal alienations was postponed until well into the nineteenth century.

The Company also made inroads on zamindars' discretionary authority by ordering dismissals of zamindari employees to increase government revenues. A large zamindari had vast powers of patronage, as the example of Burdwan shows. A table from 1766 gave the following breakdown of Burdwan employees and their support lands (see table 1).[103] This table suggests that the majority of the Burdwan employees were village (gram) servants who ordinarily took orders from village-level elites and the intermediaries between the Burdwan raj headquarters and the villages. At the village level, the duties of *mal* (land revenue) paiks (militia or footmen) were often functionally mixed and many of them were utilized simultaneously in collecting rents, escorting rents to the kachari, and guarding standing crops, harvested crops, and the village as a whole from thieves.

In addition to reducing modestly the numbers of Burdwan chakaran servants and cutting significantly their support lands, the Company disbanded a major part of the raja of Burdwan's *naqdi* or cash-paid army. Between 1761 and 1767, naqdi salaries were slashed from about Rs. 4 lakhs to just over Rs. 1 lakh.[104]

[100] Y. Burges, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 12 Dec. 1799, *BLI*, p. 406.
[101] Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 129.
[102] Ibid., para. 117.
[103] The table appears in Ray, *Change*, p. 96. Total of bighas column actually adds up to 3,59,116. It was copied from Santosh Kumar Chakrabarti, "The History of the Relations of the Rajas of Burdwan and the East India Company during 1760–1832" (University of Burdwan, Ph.D. thesis, 1970) p. 162. It is possible that the table refers to the situation in 1761, at the start of Company reductions, because a 1765 source refers to the Burdwan raja's 29,000 servants supported by only 1,46,000 bighas of chakaran. Letter from Court, 24 Dec. 1765, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. IV, *1764–1766* (Delhi, 1962), p. 121.
[104] Chakrabarti, "History," p. 163.

Table 1 *Servants of the Burdwan raj*

		Servants	Bighas
1.	Huzuri or servants attending the Raja and his relations; also mutsuddis (officers for collection)	4,710	81,840
2.	Guards in different forts and passes	4,793	82,332
3.	Pargana saranjami or servants in the high roads and head kacharis in each pargana	2,683	38,038
4.	Gram saranjami or servants such as paiks, peons, and kotwals allotted for the service of the several villages throughout the province	19,846	1,56,906
	Totals	32,032	3,59,116

In the first four decades of Company rule, the government also ordered other zamindars to dismiss some zamindari servants and it resumed chakaran in order to increase the Company's revenues. But the Company proceeded cautiously with regard to village-level servants. Company authorities wanted to avoid giving zamindars additional excuses for failure to pay their revenue.[105] In 1794, Burdwan still had 17,284 village mal paiks and chaukidars, supported by 1,38,718 bighas of chakaran,[106] nominally under the zamindar's orders but in reality subject to the authority of the zamindar's ninety or so revenue farmers.

Until the early 1790s, the Burdwan zamindar was also in charge of the district police who were commanded by an officer called the *bakshi*. Thirty-six *thanadars* or police officers managed 3,043 thanadari chaukidars, peons, and paiks and together they held 43,472 bighas of chakaran.[107] Company officials were less impressed by their suppression of crime than by the thanadars' payment of nazrs or salami to obtain their position, by police collaboration with robber gangs, and by their extortion of money from villagers.[108] In December 1792, the Company abolished zamindari police powers, transferred command of the police to British Magistrates, and began to resume some thanadari chakaran. For many decades, the position of village paiks remained ambiguous as they worked alternately for their fellow villagers, their superior landholders, the

105 Akhtar, *Role of the Zamindars*, p. 131.
106 D.J. McNeile, *Report on the Village Watch of the Lower Provinces of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1866), p. 84.
107 Ibid., p. 87.
108 Akhtar, *Role of the Zamindars*, pp. 135–46.

Company's thanadars, and the *sirdars* (leaders) of the dakait (robber) gangs.[109] The lines of authority and the field of loyalty became remarkably diffuse by the time they reached the village.

Conclusion

Late eighteenth-century Company reforms reduced the scope for Bengalis to give and receive gifts of cash, land, and employment. The Company's abandonment of the puniya, at which khilats had been conferred, signaled a retreat from symbolic to more purely contractual relations with its principal subjects. The Company's own servants were likely to be dismissed if they were found to have accepted a gift. With the virtual disappearance of the Mughal and Company models of present exchange at the top of society, the practice was less instrumental. Narrow profit margins and penalties for non-payment of the revenue limited the ability of landholders to give away cash. Company regulations and vigilance, better record keeping by government and zamindari administrators, and the greater profit orientation of auction purchasers diminished the number of new land alienations. As C.A. Bayly has suggested, the diminution of the ability to make gifts and distribute patronage struck at the currency of political bonding. He wrote that the rulers' patronage of weavers of khilats "can be regarded as something like a political discourse upholding the legitimacy of the ruler and pledging the attachment of subjects." The end of "royal patronage for India's weavers and spinners," the importation of European goods, and, by implication, the termination of political gift-giving in general thus constituted "a crisis of legitimacy for the new colonial rulers," "tantamount to a denial of political obligation."[110] The crisis, though, was slow to develop in Bengal because of British caution and forbearance in resuming non-*badshahi* alienations of land.

Each time the Company embarked on the resumption of unsanctioned alienations, it exempted those made in the distant past. Under the 1793 regulations, only lands fraudulently alienated since 1765 were resumable; in 1840, the year 1790 was made the cut-off point.[111] Any general resumption would have injured a major part of Bengal's elite and might have alienated the even more numerous dependents of the landholders, civil servants, and religious specialists who held the privileged tenures. So common were the non-taxed holdings that eighteenth-century Bengalis seemed to regard elite exemptions from taxation

[109] McNeile, *Report on the Village Watch*, pp. 88–91.
[110] Bayly, "The Origins of Swadeshi," p. 302.
[111] Chittabrata Palit, *Tensions in Bengal Rural Society: Landlords, Planters and Colonial Rule, 1830–1860* (Calcutta, 1975), p. 51.

as a fundamental right. Sayyid Ghulam Husain Tabatabai, a non-Bengali, expressed his gratitude in 1782 to the British for leaving "unmolested" the hereditary revenue-free lands conferred by the Mughals: "Thanks be to God Almighty...that it is become customary and established, that those who satisfied with little, have let themselves down the scanty stream of resignation and contentment, should be suffered to glide safely in it with their children and families."[112]

Beginning in 1828, the Company began more systematic resumptions of unsanctioned alienations. The large increase in rents, coupled with the stability of the state's demand and the relative ease with which zamindars were paying the demand, made resumptions a more palatable policy than it had been in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, landholders protested vigorously. The Calcutta Landholders' Society submitted a petition with about 20,000 signatures in 1837 arguing that the Company was inappropriately extending "European Rules" to "Hindoostan." It claimed that in Europe "it is necessary for all Subjects to defray the expenses of Government." In India, on the other hand, there had always been "rent free lands being calculated to encourage the acquisition of knowledge, to secure the maintenance of learned and ingenious men, and to preserve the observance of the religious orders and the sacerdotal Functions." Moreover, in Europe, "all the Subjects in common are authorized and empowered to consider the income and expense of Government." Because the inhabitants of India were not "empowered to consider" tax policy, the Company could not "with propriety" apply European rules to India.[113] Despite the perhaps unprecedented concerted opposition to a Company policy in Bengal, the government by 1846 had managed to resume almost 86 lakhs of bighas of alienated land in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, which was more than the total of alienated land which James Grant had estimated (81.25 lakhs) for Bengal alone in 1786. The government tried to allay the strenuous objections by assessing the land at half the rate of ordinary land and by sparing from resumption scattered lakhiraj estates of less than 50 bighas.[114] The resumptions were therefore but a partial step towards the principle of equal taxation.

It must be stressed that this chapter has identified a trend rather than a complete transformation. Indian kingship was always extractive. The expansion of money-value in political relationships does not negate mutuality. The increase in fiscal efficiency and discipline does not imply that reciprocity and generosity ceased to bring honor. Rather, the tighter administrative-legal

[112] Khan, *Seir*, vol. III, pp. 12–13.
[113] Petition from Calcutta Landholders' Society, Oct. 1837, Bengal Rev. Prog. 35 of 15 Jan. 1839, vol. 976.
[114] Palit, *Tensions*, pp. 42–54. In 1938, over 1 million tenants still held more than 3.6 million bighas of "rent-free cultivated land." Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, p. 56.

framework diminished opportunities for beneficence and forced the multiplicity of human aspirations into slightly different channels. The local raja continued to share mutual interests with both the inhabitants of his estate below and the government above. But the raja who failed in his extractive work faced loss of position and of his ability to fulfill a central obligation of this *kali-yuga*: the giving of gifts to honored subjects.

PART TWO

Burdwan

6 Mughal Burdwan and the rise of the Burdwan raj

The Burdwan raj and other expanded local kingdoms of eighteenth-century Bengal were products of nawabi patronage rather than military adventurism. Whether the productive partnership between the Punjabi ancestors of the Burdwan raj family and the Mughals began outside of Bengal or within is not known. The collaboration was established by 1657 when the Mughal government appointed Abu Rai to the office of kotwal (police officer) in Burdwan town. By 1680, the Burdwan family had obtained a small zamindari and had entered the Mughal revenue-collecting hierarchy. In subsequent decades, the Burdwan zamindari expanded over hundreds of villages and gained broad autonomy over its internal affairs. By the mid-eighteenth century it covered some 5,000 square miles and was a virtual Hindu kingdom within the weakening provincial Mughal hegemony.

The Burdwan raj family was geographically positioned to benefit from Mughal favor by virtue of its domicile, first near and then in Burdwan town. From the outset of Mughal rule in Bengal, Burdwan was a vital imperial outpost from which Mughal armies had marched to fight the Afghans who had previously ruled Bengal and to bring the largely independent chiefs to the south and west of Burdwan under Mughal administration. The town of Burdwan lies on the northern bank of the Damodar river, some 75 miles by the Grand Trunk Road northwest of Calcutta. The Damodar was more a hindrance to than a facilatator of Mughal Bengal's integration. The river's broad, sandy bed was fordable in the dry season but the river was unbridged and the river was navigable by small boats in its central and upper reaches only for a brief spell each year. During the monsoon, a high, man-made embankment imperfectly protected the military cantonment, administrative offices, bazars, temples, mosques, and mostly earthen residences of Burdwan town from the coursing waters of the Damodar in the eighteenth century. When unusually heavy rain fell or when the embankments were inadequately maintained, the Damodar breached the earthworks, flooded Burdwan town, and destroyed the crops and huts of neighboring villages. Decades of trying to contain the river with embankments on both sides of the river left deposits of sand and silt on the river bed so that in the eighteenth century the Damodar was higher than the

surrounding countryside. When cultivators cut the banks to obtain irrigation water, they heightened the likelihood of flooding.[1] Stagnant pools and swamps in which mosquitos bred often lay behind the embankments.

In its upper, western reach, the Damodar drained the sparsely settled, laterite hills of Chota Nagpur and the Santal Parganas which were largely populated by aboriginals. Some 30 miles before it reached Burdwan, it had descended into the flatter deltaic, alluvial tracts, peopled overwhelmingly with Hindus. At the time Rennell surveyed Bengal (1764-76), he showed the Damodar abruptly turning south about a dozen miles east of Burdwan town, as it does today, and flowing southward through modern Hughli, Howarh, and Midnapur districts, on its way to join the Bhagirathi or Hughli river. However, Van de Broucke's map (1658-64) shows a branch of the Damodar continuing westward and entering the Bhagirathi near Tribeni.[2] In the eighteenth century, though, the Damodar went to the south and frequently flooded the villages as it progressed towards the sea. In its lower reaches, in modern Howrah district, the periodic combination of heavy rain water and a high tide driven by hurricane winds often deposited sea water on cultivated fields, with disastrous results for crops.

The Damodar in its western section marked the southern border of both the Burdwan zamindari and the British district of Burdwan. In the eighteenth century, the territories of the rajas of Burdwan lay mostly to the north and east of the Damodar and those of the rajas of Bishnupur to the south. The northern boundary of Burdwan district was formed for most of its length by the shallow Ajay river which separated Burdwan from the territory of the Afghan rajas of Birbhum. The Ajay joined the Bhagirathi river at the town of Katwa where both the Afghans and the Mughals had maintained a fort.

Through much of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Burdwan district's boundaries roughly coincided with the limits of the Burdwan zamindari. It was shaped like a crude hammer or elm tree, with the narrow, 60-mile handle or trunk, between the Damodar and Ajay rivers, covering the rolling Asansol subdivision in the west, broadening out on the alluvial plain in the east and extending some 70 miles north to south, of which roughly 40 miles bordered the Bhagirathi river, considered by local inhabitants to be the Ganges. In the early twentieth century, the Burdwan district covered 2,689 square miles;[3] in the early nineteenth century when the Burdwan zamindari extended south into most of modern Hughli and Howrah districts, as well as northeast Midnapur, the district's area was roughly 5,000 square miles.

[1] For discussion of the effects of the Damodar embankments on the surrounding countryside, see *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government*, no. XL, *Papers of 1859 to 1863, Regarding the Damoodah Embankments (Calcutta 1863).*

[2] A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly*, pp. 24–25.

[3] J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan*, pp. 1–5.

For the first century or so of Mughal rule, the Damodar to the west of Burdwan remained the effective Mughal administrative frontier. To the south of the Damodar lay the territories of the raja of Bishnupur who enjoyed virtual independence as a subordinate tributary. South of Bishnupur was the *subah* (province) of Orissa which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries included all but the northern part (Ghatal) of modern Midnapur district. To the west and southwest of Burdwan town, the population grew thinner, more aboriginal, and more unruly. Burdwan town, then, served as a frontier post; not literally on the frontier of Mughal territory, it resembled Jahanabad (modern Arambagh in Hughli district) in being a town on the old Badshahi (royal) road from which Mughal officers defended Bengal from Afghan, Maratha, or *chuar* (tribal) depredations.[4] Burdwan begins to appear prominently in Muslim chronicles during the late sixteenth century as a market, halting place, and base for Mughal armies engaged in the protracted conquest of western Bengal and Orissa from the Afghans. Sometime around the turn of the century it supplanted Sulaimanabad (modern Salimabad, 15 miles southeast of Burdwan) as the administrative headquarters of the area around Burdwan.[5]

Burdwan was almost due south of the successive Muslim capital towns at Gaur, Pandua, Tanda, and Rajmahal along the Ganges until the Mughals shifted the capital of Bengal to Dacca in 1608. The great Badshahi road from those capitals ran south through western Murshidabad and eastern Birbhum districts to Burdwan, leaving the hills and jungle areas of Jharkhand (southeast Bihar and northwest Bengal) to the west. This road existed at least as early as the fifteenth century. From Burdwan it crossed the Damodar and traveled 24 miles to Mandaran, the frontier fort near modern Arambagh, and further south through Midnapur to Orissa. The early twentieth-century remains of the road showed that in later Mughal times it was a magnificent highway: it was a raised roadway some 75 yards wide, lined with shade trees. Each 8 miles there was a mosque with endowed lands for its upkeep and presumably a *serai* (hostel and resting place).[6] South of Burdwan, the Badshahi road in early Mughal times was not much more than a footpath.[7]

The Mughal armies, with their horses, elephants, camels, foot soldiers, and numerous camp followers, used the Badshahi road as they subdued the Afghans

[4] In the early decades of Mughal rule, Burdwan was in *sarkar* Sulaimanabad while sarkar Madaran or Mandaran formed the actual frontier. Sarkar Mandaran was a giant semi-circular administrative unit that reached from Nagar (Birbhum) "over Raneganj, Jahanabad, Western Hughli, and Howrah, to Chitwa in Midnapur, and Mandalghat in Howrah, and Mahishadal in Hijli." H. Blochmann, "Geographical and Historical Notes on the Burdwan and Presidency Divisions of Lower Bengal," in Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. I, p. 368.

[5] J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan*, p. 203.

[6] Ibid., p. 136.

[7] Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II. p. 200.

and Mughal rebels in western Bengal and Orissa in the late 1500s and early 1600s. It was also the main route for Hindus from north India and Bengal who journeyed to the Jagannath temple in Puri, Orissa. After Chaitanya (1486-1533) and his followers spread the devotional Vaishnava sect throughout Bengal, undoubtedly the traffic of Bengali pilgrims going south to Puri and northwest to Brindaban on this road increased substantially. The Badshahi road was a major thoroughfare for the integrating forces of the Mughals and Vaishnavism. It is likely that Sangam Rai, the Punjabi ancestor of the Burdwan rajas who by family tradition first settled in Bengal following a pilgrimage to Puri, traveled this road.

Yet the Mughal military and political integration of Bengal into an all-Indian empire was never easy or complete. Abul Fazl wrote that "the country of Bengal is a land where owing to the climate's favoring the base, the dust of dissension is always rising."[8] Many of the stories best known in Burdwan today are tales that reflect the resistance to the Mughal conquest and, especially, the violent struggles within the Mughal nobility. Few of the Mughal mansabdars (holders of military rank) looked upon Bengal as their home; many regarded Bengal as an undesirable assignment. Eight of the twenty Mughal subahdars (governors) of Bengal were related to the emperor (four as sons or grandsons),[9] and both the subahdars and mansabdars were often preoccupied with struggles for succession or factional maneuvering at the imperial capital over reassignment. The fact that the Mughal conquest of Bengal was a military effort to subdue local chiefs and zamindars by people who were foreign to Bengal, were assigned to Bengal on a temporary basis, and were riven by ethnic and factional rivalries repeatedly slowed the Mughal incorporation of the region into the empire.

Mughal generals such as Raja Todar Mal and Raja Man Singh used Burdwan town as their headquarters in their campaigns to subdue Afghan resistance and Mughal dissidence during the last quarter of the sixteenth century.[10] The Muslim and Hindu chiefs and zamindars of western Bengal made their peace with the Mughals somewhat earlier than the local magnates of central and eastern Bengal. In general, it seems that most of the western chiefs retained their territories as long as they paid the annual tribute or revenue and the succession fees demanded of them.

After Subahdar Islam Khan (1608-13) reduced the eastern *bhuiyas* (chiefs), the Mughals gradually introduced standard forms of administrative organiza-

[8] Quoted from *Akbarnama*, vol. III, p. 428, by Atul Chandra Roy, *History of Bengal: Mughal Period (1526–1765 A.D.)* (Calcutta, 1968), p. 113.

[9] Ascoli, *Early Revenue History*, p. 12.

[10] Charles Stewart, *The History of Bengal from the First Mohammedan Invasion until the Virtual Conquest of that Country by the English, A.D. 1757* (Calcutta, 1903, reprint of 1813 edn.), pp. 176–205.

tion in much of Bengal. This usually meant that a faujdar (military governor) was head of the executive government in a sarkar or a group of parganas (sub-districts). But the loyalty of Bengal's chiefs and zamindars to the faujdars seems to have been contingent and pragmatic. The wars of succession that broke out near the end of each emperor's rule meant that the subahdars themselves calculated the relative strength of different factions at the capital before obeying imperial commands. The hereditary chiefs were forced to develop a similar tactical sensitivity to the maneuvers of the mansabdari factions. Few chiefs or zamindars resisted Prince Khurram, and some helped him, when he captured Burdwan in 1622 and made Bengal independent of his father, Jahangir. When Aurangzib sent Mir Jumla against his brother, Subahdar Shah Shuja, in 1659, the zamindars of Birbhum and other areas guided Mir Jumla's army through the jungly hills of Jharkhand and Birbhum, thus enabling Mir Jumla to outflank Shuja who was guarding the Teliyagarhi pass on the Ganges.[11] In 1696-97, when the rebels Shova Singh and Rahim Khan killed the zamindar of Burdwan and seized west Bengal, the local zamindars offered little resistance to the rebels. But as Aurangzib's grandson, Azim-ud-din, moved down the Badshahi road from Rajmahal to Burdwan in late 1697, zamindars came forward to show their allegiance.[12] It seems that chiefs and zamindars found the wisest course to be one of watchful, respectful reserve, recognizing that the politics of the imperial family and court were kaleidescopic and unpredictable.

During more than a century and a half of Mughal rule, Burdwan town acquired the character of a provincial Mughal administrative center and military outpost. In the time of Raja Man Singh (1594-1605), Burdwan contained a fort, a mosque, a bazar that provisioned Mughal troops, a Muslim settlement, and the grave of the noted Turkistani pir, Bahram Sekka. Bahram Sekka had been a water-carrier in Mecca and Najaf before coming to Delhi where he gained Akbar's admiration. He then settled in Burdwan. The Arabic inscription on his tomb instructed that "the rich should, according to the injunction of the Koran, with pleasure, help orphans, beggars, the afflicted and the homeless."[13] At least by the nineteenth century, his tomb was revered by both Hindus and Muslims.

There were other colonies of Muslims scattered along the Badshahi road at places such as Mangalkat and Mandaran and in the strip of land between that road and the Bhagirathi river, some 30 miles east of Burdwan town. These Muslim colonies, the most prominent of which were at Pandua and Hughli, consisted of revenue collectors, learned men, merchants, ex-soldiers, and their converts and dependents. Elite Muslims enjoyed revenue-free a'imma land

[11] Richard Bum (ed.), *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. IV (Cambridge 1937), p. 225.
[12] D. Majumdar, *WBDG: Birbhum*, p. 106.
[13] [Burdwan Raj], *A Handbook of Useful Information Regarding Burdwan* (n.p., n.d., reprinted by the Burdwan Raj in 1938), p. 1. This publication is hereafter cited as *Burdwan Handbook*.

grants. In 1802, one of every sixteen residents of Burdwan district was said to be a Muslim.[14]

The zamindars who collected the land revenue for the Mughal government were mostly Bengali Hindus but they were supervised by non-Bengali mansabdars who came to Bengal, as we have noted, on temporary assignments. The mansabdars, not the zamindars, were the "officers of the king." They provided most of the recruits for the *umara* or nobility, which M. Athar Ali described as persons holding mansabdari ranks of 1,000 or more *zat* (Mughal rank number).[15] The highest ranks and salaries, the largest jagirs, and the greatest political power were held by these men. The mansabdari ranks in the seventeenth century were all but closed to Bengalis, being generally restricted to up-country or non-Indian Muslims, Rajputs, Marathas, and, in fewer cases, to north Indian commercial castes such as the Khatris. Of the 575 major mansabdars throughout India between 1679 and 1707 identified by M. Athar Ali, apart from Muslims there were seventy-three Rajputs, ninety-six Marathas, and only thirteen "other Hindus."[16] No major mansabdar, Hindu or Muslim, was identified as a Bengali.[17] Even superior non-military administrative posts went to non-Bengalis. According to Jadunath Sarkar, before 1700 "the higher posts in the revenue, accounts and secretariat departments were reserved for Muslims and Hindus from Upper India, such as Katris from the Punjab and Agra and Lalas from the U.P."[18] They were more likely to have served the Mughals before entering Bengal and know Persian than Bengalis were, and less likely to have local connections subversive of the imperial interest.

Among the up-country Hindus to receive Mughal appointments was Abu Rai, the founder of the Burdwan raj. Abu Rai's grandfather, Sangam Rai, a Khatri Kapur[19] from Kotli *mahalla* (neighborhood) in Lahore, first came to Bengal in the sixteenth century, according to Burdwan raj family tradition. Sangam Rai was said to have accompanied "a band of pilgrims" to the Jagannath temple in Orissa and, while returning, was so impressed by the beauty and fertility of the

[14] *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. II, p. 627.

[15] Ali, *Mughal Nobility*, p. 2. *Zat* was a rank number used to determine the personal pay of a mansabdar, as distinct from *sawar*, the number which indicated the military force he was required to maintain.

[16] Ibid., p. 35.

[17] Ibid., pp. 216–71. Raychaudhuri, *Bengal*, p. 163, states that "we do not hear in any place of Bengalis being actually given *mansabs*," apart from zamindars who were "drafted into service" to support Mughal military campaigns.

[18] Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 223.

[19] The Kapurs were one of the four highest *gotras* or exogenous groups in the Khatri jati or caste. These four (Kapurs, Mehras, Khannas, and Seths) formed an endogamous unit. The intermediate twelve gotras constituted a separate endogamous group while the lowest gotras (conventionally fifty-two) formed a third. W.H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (Oxford, 1976), p. 99.

Burdwan area that he settled in the village of Baikunthapur, a few miles from Burdwan, where he became a trader and money-lender.[20]

The story of the pilgrimage to Puri should be viewed with skepticism because it is the conventional means used to explain the origin of many raj families in west Bengal who probably hoped to establish a non-materialist, pious motive for their migration to Bengal. What is not in question is that the Burdwan raj family are members of a Punjabi Khatri caste. The fact yields clues to both the arrival of Sangam Rai in Bengal and his descendants' preferment under the Mughals.

The Khatris were a Punjabi mercantile caste who claimed to be Kshatriyas. Nineteenth-century Indians and British administrators failed to agree whether that claim should be accepted.[21] The fact that the overwhelming majority were engaged in Vaishya (mercantile), not Kshatriya (military), pursuits was balanced against the Khatri origin myths, the apparent derivation of "Khatri" from "Kshatriya," the large physical stature of Khatris, the superior status accorded Khatris by fellow Punjabis, and the willingness of the Khatris' *purohits* ("chaplains"), the Saraswat Brahmins, to accept cooked food from the Khatris. Among the inhabitants of Burdwan district they are generally recognized as Kshatriyas. In the Mughal and British periods, the Khatris were noted for their energy, astuteness, and mobility as traders, money-lenders, accountants, administrators, and religious leaders.[22] Shyam Das, the gosain who helped initiate a Vaishnava revival among Hindu traders in the southwest Punjab in the mid-sixteenth century, was a Khatri. So, too, were Nanak (1469-1537), the founder of Sikhism, and the other nine Sikh gurus.[23]

Most Khatris remained Hindus. The Khatri reputation rested primarily on their commercial activities. By the eighteenth century, and probably long before, they were a dominant group in the trade of the Punjab and Afghanistan, and they had penetrated into Turkistan and also east and south into many parts of India. The Pathans were said to be particularly dependent upon the Khatris as merchants and money-lenders.[24] This raises the possibility that Khatris were resident in Bengal in pre-Mughal times. However, Khatri adoption of administrative and military roles outside the Punjab was mainly the result of the patronage of Mughal nobles. One of Akbar's leading generals who fought the Afghans in western Bengal and Orissa was a Khatri. This was Raja Todar Mal

[20] *Burdwan Handbook*, p. 8, and J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan*, pp. 26–27.

[21] John Nesfield and George Cambell were inclined to accept the claim; Herbert Risely and Denzil Ibbetson doubted it. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, pp. 478–80.

[22] H.A. Rose (compiler), *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (3 vols., Lahore 1911–19), vol. II, pp. 501–06.

[23] Ibid., vol. I, pp. 388–89 and 676–86.

[24] Ibid., vol. II, pp. 506–07.

who stayed in Burdwan and who, as imperial diwan, was responsible for the land revenue settlement of 1582. Todar Mal's son, Raja Kalyan, was governor of Orissa early in the seventeenth century.[25] It is conceivable that Sangam Rai entered Bengal in the train of one of these imperial Khatri officers although the only evidence about how he came is the vague pilgrimage legend. During the seventeenth century, small communities of Khatris developed in a number of Bengali towns. When the ninth Sikh guru, Tegh Bahadur, visited Dacca in 1666, he was welcomed by a Khatri community.[26] At that time there were also Sikh communities (probably Khatri) in Bengali towns such as Sylhet, Chittagong, Sandip, and Lashkar.[27]

The Khatri–Mughal partnership grew closer and more complicated in the late 1600s and early 1700s. A nineteenth century Khatri legend said that, until the time of Aurangzib, Khatris followed the military profession. After many Khatris were killed during Aurangzib's Deccan campaign, the emperor, out of compassion, ordered their widows be remarried. When the leader of the Khatris' caste affairs refused to obey the order, the legend continued, Aurangzib terminated Khatri military service and directed them "to be shopkeepers and brokers for the future."[28] A tradition of far greater plausibility is that the Sikh rebellion in the Punjab in the early eighteenth century damaged the commerce on which Khatri traders depended and obliged some Khatris to choose between the Jat Sikh followers of the rebel leader, Banda, and the imperial Mughals. Mughals suspected Khatri officials of sympathizing with or supporting Banda. Khatris in Mughal service, whose commercial associates stood to lose from prolonged civil disorder, submitted to the Mughal order of 1710 to shave their beards so that loyalists could be more easily distinguished from the rebels. Khatris not only shaved but some contributed money for the imperial campaign against the Sikhs.[29]

The disruption of the Punjab's trade and Khatri alienation from Sikh rebels may have increased Khatri pursuit of non-commercial activities both within and outside the Punjab in the early eighteenth century. As imperial hegemony waned, the Khatri importance to Mughal officers increased. Khatris were employed as vakils to manage the financial affairs of various mansabdars. Khatri accounting skills and connections with bankers equipped them for this role. The nazim of Bengal and the *nizam-ul-mulk* of Hyderabad both employed

25 Beni Prasad, *History of Jahangir* (5th edn., Allahabad, 1962), p. 281.

26 There was still a sizeable Khatri community in Dacca in 1830 when a census showed that 1,070 out of Dacca's 31,429 Hindus were Khatris. Almost half (523) belonged to "service" families while 494 came from commercial households. Sharif Uddin Ahmed, *Dacca: A Study in Urban History and Development* (London, 1986), pp. 20–21.

27 Rose, *A Glossary*, vol. I, pp. 686–87.

28 Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. IV, p. 48.

29 Alam, *Crisis of Empire*, pp. 149–52.

Khatri vakils, as did lesser nobles. Khatris were also appointed to lower-level administrative positions, such as diwan (revenue officer) and *peshkar* (manager for a superior official) under local officials. Atma Ram, a Khatri, served as the diwan of Awadh province. A contemporary chronicle referred to particular Khatris as *umara* (nobles) and *ayan* (notable), which indicated their wealth and the importance of the services they provided the Mughals in the early eighteenth century.[30]

A handful of Khatri families prospered in Bengal in the first half of the eighteenth century. This was the period in which the Burdwan raj grew into the richest and most powerful landholding family in the province. By mid-century, Omichand, a Sikh Khatri, was one of the richest merchants in Calcutta. In 1757, Manikchandra was one of Nazim Siraj-ud-daula's leading generals. In the 1770s, Hazari Mal, Omichand's brother-in-law, served as the East India Company's official banker. But Burdwan district was the main area of Khatri settlement in the province of Bengal. A considerable number of Khatri families settled in Burdwan district, often as landholders under the Burdwan raj, and gradually assimilated Bengali life styles. The first count of Khatris in Burdwan seems to have been the 1872 census which enumerated 13,660.[31]

Thus, Khatris accompanied the Mughals to Bengal from the conquest in the 1500s, benefited through trade and service from the extension of the Mughal domain into Afghanistan and the far corners of India, and then opted to serve the Mughals in more cases than ever in the waning years of the empire as the Jats became dominant in the Sikh *panth* (community) and revolted against Mughal rule under Banda's leadership (1708-15). As Khatris settled across India in Mughal towns, some remained in trade and money-lending, others served in official or unofficial positions under Mughal officers. And as Mughals looked for reliable collectors of the land revenue, they inevitably turned to Khatris upon occasion. In the early eighteenth-century Punjab, when Mughal officials "feared" the hereditary zamindars and other rebellious elements, "the Khatris seem to have often been the ijaradars [temporary revenue farmers] in the province, since they had money and were in a position to ensure undisturbed realization of the revenue, through their social and professional connections with the villages."[32] In Bengal in the second half of the seventeenth century, members of the Burdwan raj family made a familiar Khatri transition from trader to local official and then to modest landholder.

Abu Rai, grandson of Sangam Rai, the original immigrant to Bengal, was the

[30] Ibid., pp. 169–75, 203, and 316–17.

[31] This figure is misleading because it combined pure Khatris with the endogamous Piruwal jati which was formed by the offspring of the Khatris' concubines. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. IV, p. 49.

[32] Alam, *Crisis of Empire*, p. 152.

first member of the family known to have been employed by the Mughals. Apparently, he was a successful merchant because he was said to have provisioned the faujdar's troops "at a critical time." Subsequently, Abu Rai was appointed chaudhuri (revenue collector) and kotwal (police chief) of Rekhabi bazar in Burdwan town, serving under the faujdar of *chakla* Burdwan. The date of that appointment may have been either 1657-58 or 1679-80, depending on whether Abu Rai received one or two appointments.[33] What seems clear is that Abu Rai did receive an appointment, either his first or his second, in 1679-80, as a kotwal of a bazar as well as a chaudhuri of pargana Ibrahimpur.[34] Thus it seems possible that Abu Rai began with police and collection powers over a bazar and then received additional authority to collect one pargana's land revenue.

Nothing else is known about Abu Rai. Yet we may find clues about the growth of his family's influence in the vicinity of Burdwan town by considering the extensive functions assigned to the Mughal kotwals in general. It may be that Abu Rai executed his duties as kotwal in a manner that convinced his superiors that he and his relatives could collect the neighboring villages' revenues as well. The kotwal's duties are described in the *Ain-i Akbari*;[35] in Hedayetullah Bihari's *Hedayet-ul-Quwaid*, a Mughal administrative manual written in 1715;[36] a farman from Akbar instructing a kotwal on his duties;[37] another Mughal farman appointing a kotwal to Daulatabad;[38] and Manucci's description of a kotwal's duties in Aurangzib's reign.[39] The picture of a kotwal in these five sources is similar and it seems reasonable to speculate that Abu Rai's functions may have resembled it.

The kotwal's primary duty was to provide security for both the state and the local population. He appointed watchmen and commanded a body of foot soldiers and horsemen to guard the town at night and catch thieves. He also watched strangers and other suspicious persons and employed nightwatchmen and sweepers to spy on the people and gather intelligence for the Mughal government. According to Akbar's farman, he was to keep track of the

33 J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan*, p. 27, and *Burdwan Handbook*, p. 8, both state that the first appointment was in 1657, corresponding to 1068 A.H. Other sources mention 1679–80 as the first appointment. These include Rouse, *Dissertation*, p. 242; "A Genealogical Account of the Burdwan Family: Translated from a Persian Manuscript," *Hindoo Patriot*, 26 March 1857; and a note on zamindari inheritance, BOR Prog. of 2 April 1788, vol. 128, app. 15.

34 The location of pargana Ibrahimpur is unknown. H. Blochmann mentioned a *mahal* called Bazar Ibrahimpur in Birbhum district. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. I, p. 370.

35 [Allami], *Aini-i-Akbari*, tr. Blochman, vol. II, pp. 43–45.

36 Sarkar, *Mughal Administration*, pp. 57–59.

37 Ibid., p. 59.

38 Dow, *History*, Vol. III, pp. 376-77.

39 Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, vol. II, p. 420-21.

expenditures of each household "because when a man spends in excess of his income it is certain that he is doing something wrong."[40] He was to protect public morality by preventing the sale and consumption of liquor, prohibiting prostitution, and ensuring that there were separate wells and ferries for men and women. He was to "have the hands shortened" of "insidious old women, pimps, or jugglers, who lead the wives and daughters of honest men into the ways of evil."[41]

He was further instructed to organize the population into *mahallas* (neighborhoods), appointing headmen to each as well as to lead each craft guild. The Daulatabad farman charged him with settling "all quarrels and vexatious disputes which may arise." And, finally, he was expected to regulate prices in the bazars, prevent merchant monopolies, and, according to Manucci, collect government revenues such as cesses on trade.

The intrusive functions assigned to the kotwal do not correspond to what is known about the relaxed control of local state officials in eighteenth-century Bengal except during Murshid Quli Khan's reign and it is an open question whether kotwals exercised such sweeping power in the seventeenth century in many Bengali towns. However, Burdwan was the seat of a faujdar and at times it was also a garrison town and the temporary residence of various nazims. In such Mughal administrative outposts, vigilance for seditious persons, enforcement of Islamic prescriptions, and regulation of food prices were not out of the ordinary in Bengal.

There are references in imperial edicts and European travelers' accounts that show that the great power conferred upon kotwals was often abused and that kotwals frequently ignored the Mughal guidelines about protecting people from oppressive behavior. Francisco Palsaert, who resided in Agra in the 1620s, reported that the local administration was "absolutely autocratic," that laws were "scarcely observed at all." In non-capital legal cases, the faujdar and kotwal "merely confiscated" the property of the accused. The kotwal and the qazi settled "ordinary questions of divorce, quarrels, fights, and the like," but they did so only for bribes. "Their eyes are bleared with greed, their mouths gape like wolves for covetousness, and their bellies hunger for the bread of the poor."[42] Thomas Bowrey wrote that local officials in Bengal in the 1670s accepted monthly payments from prostitutes in return for allowing them to practice their trade and that the prostitutes were required to "dance and Singe, and make many Salams" each Thursday night at the governor's and kotwal's house. "Then the handsomest of them must stay all night to Suppresse the

[40] The *Ain* also said he should keep track of incomes.

[41] Dow, *History*, vol. III, p. 376.

[42] Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India: The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, tr. W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl (Cambridge, 1925), p. 57.

Leachery of him and his Punes [peons]."[43] Yet, under a vigilant subahdar, blatant misbehavior could bring dire punishment. Murshid Quli Khan had the kotwal of Hughli stoned to death for taking a young girl away from a Mughal merchant.[44]

In whatever manner Abu Rai performed as kotwal, he apparently extended his influence without disappointing his Mughal superiors because his successors were also appointed to the office of chaudhuri with the additional title of zamindar. The position of chaudhuri in the seventeenth century was part of the system of checks and balances that characterized Mughal administration. "Usually" or "invariably" the chaudhuri was himself a zamindar.[45] But he had special functions assigned to him and had to be appointed by a special sanad. The chaudhuri's primary concern was with the collection of the revenue but he also "stood surety for the lesser zamindars" and for *taqavi* (state advances for agriculture) loans, for which he received a commission on what was owed. He was the counterpart of and the check on the qanungo, one or two of whom were assigned to each pargana to keep records on assessment levels, receipts, cultivation, and local customs. The chaudhuri was an important local functionary and "in most cases he was the leading *zamindar* of the locality."[46] In addition to sanctioned commissions and *nankar* (support allowance), many chaudhuris obtained bribes and a'imma (revenue-free) lands.[47] Like the position of qanungo, it was a useful one from which to build capital for land investments, learn land management techniques, accumulate local knowledge, and attract official notice. It is not surprising that the founders of the three fastest growing zamindaris in eighteenth-century Bengal (Burdwan, Dinajpur, and Rajshahi) had worked as chaudhuris or in the qanungo department.

Abu Rai was succeeded by his son, Babu Rai, as chaudhuri and zamindar of pargana Burdwan and three other mahals. Babu Rai moved his family's residence from Baikunthapur village to Burdwan town which remained one of the family's principal homes until World War II.

In Babu Rai's time, the faujdar of the area lived in or near the Burdwan fort. The regular presence of an important Mughal official and occasional visits of the imperial army presumably meant that the Burdwan zamindar was less independent than most zamindars of the period. Undoubtedly, Babu Rai's family derived advantages from contacts with the military governor and other officers. The contact would have provided a window into the workings of Mughal politics and enabled them to learn what made for advancement. Imperial officers

[43] Bowrey, *Geographical Account*, pp. 206-07.
[44] Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 71.
[45] Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 174 and 291.
[46] Ibid., pp. 289–93.
[47] Ibid., pp. 254 and 294.

also would have been able to appraise the talents and loyalty of members of the Burdwan zamindari family. The size of the family's holdings grew modestly in the late seventeenth century. Babu Rai was succeeded by Ghanashyam Rai and he by Krishnaram Rai.[48]

Krishnaram Rai obtained new estates in an unspecified manner and received a farman from Aurangzib in 1695-96, confirming him as zamindar and chaudhuri of "parganas Burdwan, etc." To obtain the farman, Krishnaram paid the emperor a *nazrana* of Rs.1 lakh.[49] James Grant estimated that the size of the zamindari at this time was four or five parganas.[50] How large was a zamindari of four or five parganas? A crude estimate is possible although the variation in the size of Bengal's parganas was huge. Shah Shuja's revenue settlement of 1658 had divided Bengal into 1,043 parganas.[51] If the parganas held by Krishnaram were of average size and if Bengal had 110,000 villages,[52] then the Burdwan zamindari might have contained 400 villages. Probably it was smaller.[53] By the standards of seventeenth-century Bengal, the Burdwan zamindari was a significant estate, in part because it contained a major garrison and market town and the seat of a faujdar.

It is interesting that the only acts attributed to Ghanashyam and Krishnaram by a Burdwan raj handbook were not deeds of bravery or economic development but rather the construction of the Shyamsagar and Krishnagar tanks (ponds) in Burdwan town.[54] Tank excavation was one of the principal charitable behaviors expected of a zamindar of Bengal. As with the origin myth linking the family's arrival to a pilgrimage to Puri, the Burdwan family was projecting itself in the role of the pious, religiously oriented, and beneficent Hindu raja. An early nineteenth-century account explained that the digging of a tank "to supply the thirsty traveller with water" was an expensive undertaking, often costing Rs. 4,000 for the excavation, the installation of steps, and the assembly of Brahmins for its consecration. At the latter, a priest recited verses from the Shastras and

48 The family genealogy states that in each of the four successions between 1657 and 1696, sons succeeded their fathers. This seems biologically unlikely.

49 According to a farman from Emperor Muhammad Shah to Kirtichandra, zamindar of Burdwan, in 1736–37. This farman will be subsequently cited as "Muhammad Shah's farman of 1736–37." A photocopy and a translation of the farman are in an album, in the possession of the Burdwan raj family in Calcutta, entitled "Photographs of Farmans, Sanads, etc., Received by the Rajas, Maharajadhirajas of Burdwan from the Mogul Emperors and the British Government."

50 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 194.

51 Ascoli, *Early Revenue History*, p. 23.

52 Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 10.

53 In Todar Mal's time, the average revenue roll for a pargana in the sarkar of Sharifabad, in which Burdwan was located, was smaller than in most Bengal sarkars. [Allami], *Ain-i Akbari*, tr. Blochman, vol. II, p. 153.

54 *Burdwan Handbook*, p. 7.

then, in the name of the donor, said "I offer this pond of water to quench the thirst of mankind." One Burdwan resident, apparently not a member of the Burdwan zamindari family, was reputed to have dug 100 tanks around Burdwan. In villages where water was scarce, villagers approached this benefactor who then obtained the zamindar of Burdwan's permission and excavated a tank.[55]

On the eve of Shova Singh's revolt of 1696, in which Krishnaram Rai was to die, the Burdwan raj family had completed the transition from commerce and money-lending to town police chief to zamindar. In shifting from the position of kotwal to zamindar, the Burdwan family was moving across one of the major fault lines in Mughal society, the line that separated the appointive imperial bureaucracy and military service from hereditary, landholding, local gentry. The move from one career arena to the other was an important step towards the domestication of the family in Bengal. Members of the imperial bureaucracy were not only appointed, they were subject to frequent transfers, often outside their own province. They were often paid with temporary assignments of land (jagirs) that were scattered and therefore difficult to manage. They were subject to escheat of their property upon death. The position of zamindars before 1700 was in many respects the opposite. Most zamindars held their territory by heredity. They were rarely transferred. Their property was not normally subject to escheat. Their territory was less likely to be assessed by local survey than those held by members of the imperial military-bureaucracy. In general, they were dispossessed only when they rebelled or failed to pay the succession fees or revenue demand. Zamindaris could be sold or divided by their holders. They were, in fact, a species of private property.[56]

There was overlap between the categories of zamindar and mansabdar. Many mansabdars held hereditary, non-transferable home estates known as *watan-jagirs*[57] in which they were effectively zamindars. Moreover, zamindar chiefs, when defeated and incorporated into the empire, were restored to their lands as their estates were returned to them as jagirs. Of the 575 mansabdars identified by M. Athar Ali as having *zat* (Mughal rank number) rank of 1,000 or more between 1679 and 1707, "81 were zamindars also."[58] But the basic distinction holds. In general, zamindars were hereditary leaders of local communities who preserved the forms of Hindu kingship and ritual communal life; mansabdars were temporary, appointive, mostly Muslim representatives of the imperial government from whose ranks the higher bureaucrats and military officers came.

[55] Ward, *View*, vol. II, p. 287.
[56] Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 179.
[57] Ibid., p. 184.
[58] Ali, *Mughal Nobility*, p. 12.

7 Burdwan's expansion

A major revolt, led by Shova Singh and Rahim Khan, shook Mughal administration in Bengal in 1696-98. The rebels almost obliterated the Burdwan raj family and they overran most of western Bengal. The uprising broke a prolonged period of relative peace and growing prosperity in the province, fueled by the trading activities of local entrepreneurs and northern European trading companies. The inability of imperial officers to suppress the revolt quickly revealed serious weaknesses in both local administration and the empire's superstructure. Discipline among imperial officers was weakening as Aurangzib's campaign in the Deccan proceeded inconclusively, as the emoluments in the form of jagir assignments no longer provided expected incomes, as nobles began to anticipate a succession struggle following Aurangzib's death, and as some officials in Bengal neglected administrative duties in favor of trading opportunities.

The 1696-98 revolt led to the appointment of Murshid Quli Khan as the province's diwan. Murshid Quli's regime in Bengal, coupled with Aurangzib's death and the attenuation of Delhi's authority, produced a lowering of the center of gravity in Mughal India's decision-making processes, a localization of power, and the emergence of a regional dynasty. Not only did Bengal become virtually independent in the following decades, much of the authority once commanded by temporary mansabdars appointed from Delhi now devolved upon hereditary and newly enlarged zamindars. Murshid Quli Khan relied on fewer but expanded zamindaris to collect the state's revenue. The growth of the Burdwan zamindari under Kirtichandra Rai (1702-40) and Chitrasen Rai (1740-44) affords an opportunity to examine in detail the process by which power was restructured and one eighteenth-century zamindari absorbed its neighbors. In many parts of India in the eighteenth century, provincial governors were breaking away from Delhi's control and aligning themselves with an emerging class of powerful zamindars. As imperial power waned, the influence of local magnates willing to cooperate with the provincial successor states expanded. So did the opportunity to share in the honorable enterprise of local kingship.

The rebel Shova Singh belonged to a Chauhan Rajput family which had migrated to Bengal four generations earlier, joining other Chauhan Rajputs in the Chandrakona–Ghatal region of what is now northern Midnapur district,

40 miles southwest of Burdwan town. The region was an important trading and manufacturing center at least by the early eighteenth century, producing both sugar and woven goods, and it is likely that at the time of Shova Singh's revolt it was already prospering from the rising demand of the Europeans at Hughli, Hijili, and other ports. As early as 1661, Indian merchants at Hughli were supplying English factors with Chandrakona sugar.[1]

Shova Singh had emerged as a powerful landholder, having obtained pargana Chitwa near Chandrakona and then pargana Barda (modern Ghatal),[2] perhaps from fellow Rajputs who had long dominated the area. The area had been part of the Bishnupur zamindari in the past and there is strong evidence, overlooked in other accounts of Shova Singh's revolt, that Shova Singh was expected to pay his revenue through the raja of Bishnupur.[3]

Shova's original motives are obscure. It is not known, for example, whether he was emboldened to challenge Mughal authority as a result of a perception that the Mughal hold on Bengal was weakening. He must have known that the English East India Company had been permitted to return to their trading posts after declaring war on the Mughals, shelling and burning much of Hughli town, attacking Thana fort, burning Balasore, and capturing Hijili in 1686-87. Nor is it clear if Shova's revolt was originally aimed at the expanding power of the Burdwan zamindari or at the Mughal government itself. Charles Stewart stated that Shova was "dissatisfied" with the Burdwan zamindar;[4] an early twentieth-century account said that the Burdwan zamindar, Krishnaram, "plundered Shova Singh, the troublesome Zamindar of Chitwa."[5] On the other hand, Ghulam Hussain Salim wrote in 1787 that the Burdwan zamindar "smarted under" Shova's "oppressions" and offered military resistance.[6] Perhaps the best piece of evidence is the 1736-37 farman from Emperor Muhammad Shah to Kirtichandra of Burdwan which said that Shova rebelled after Raghunath Singh II, zamindar of Bishnupur from 1694 to 1730, "failed to pay the revenue" of parganas Barda, Chitwa, etc., "the Zamindari Mahals of the miscreant." The farman goes on to say, without explanation of the motive, that Shova rebelled against the Mughal government and "plundered the entire property, Cash &c. of Kishen Ram deceased [Krishnaram of Burdwan] and killèd Kishen Ram himself and 25 members of his family."[7] The variations in the accounts might be explained by the hypothesis that Krishnaram provoked Shova Singh by

[1] Wilson, *Early Annals*, vol. I, p. 380.
[2] Shumboo Chunder Dey, *Hooghly Past and Present* (Calcutta, 1906), p. 36.
[3] Emperor Muhammad Shah's farman of 1736–37 to Kirtichandra clearly implies that.
[4] Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 370.
[5] Dey, *Hooghly*, p. 35.
[6] Salim, *Riyazu*, pp. 231–33.
[7] Emperor Muhammad Shah's farman of 1736–37.

aiding the Mughal provincial government in trying to recover Shova's revenue arrears to Raja Raghunath Singh II of Bishnupur.

In any case, Shova Singh invited Rahim Khan, the slit-nosed leader of the Afghans living in Orissa, which then included all but the northern part of Midnapur district, to bring his army north and join in an attack on Burdwan in January 1696. Shova Singh and Rahim Khan attacked Burdwan town which was defended by few soldiers, killed Krishnaram, and seized his money and jewels.[8] Most accounts say that Shova captured Krishnaram's wives and daughters; a Burdwan Raj family tradition recorded in the nineteenth century said that all but one daughter committed suicide by poisoning themselves to avoid capture and that the family still honored the women's heroism with an annual spring ritual.[9] Krishnaram's young son, Jagatram, escaped and fled to the safety of the nawab's court at Dacca.[10]

The nawab at Dacca and the faujdar at Hughli were slow to recognize the seriousness of the rebellion. After taking Burdwan, the rebels marched east to Hughli and captured that rich port from the Mughals in July 1696, driving out the Europeans in the process. Shova Singh then returned to Burdwan where Krishnaram's daughter, Satyabati, was held captive. When he tried "to stain the hem of the maiden's chastity," she killed him by cutting "him up from below the navel to the belly" with a knife she had hidden and then took her own life.[11]

The revolt, instead of being checked by Shova's death, took on major dimensions. The Afghan, Rahim Khan, assumed leadership of the revolt under the title of Rahim Shah (king). He was assisted by Shova's brother and was joined by other rebels and "soldiers of fortune," including Rahim's fellow Afghans domiciled in Orissa.[12] Relations between Mughals and Afghans, whom the Mughals had displaced by their conquest of Bengal, were prickly even when the Mughals employed them as mercenaries. Alivardi Khan's Afghan troops were a major threat to his regime in the 1740s. Sayyid Ghulam Husain Khan's contempt for the Afghans may have been common among Mughal officers of Persian or Turani ancestry: he described them as courageous, covetous, coarse,

8 [Allah], *Narrative*, p. 5.

9 William Wilson Hunter, *Orissa* (2 vols., London 1872), vol. II, pp. 26–27.

10 At least according to most accounts. However, Dey wrote that Krishnaram first sent his son to the protection of the raja of Nadia and "slew the females of his family in order to avoid their falling into the hands of the enemy." *Hooghly*, p. 36.

11 Salim, *Riyazu*, p. 233. A contemporary French account by François Martin of Chandanagar states that Shova Singh died as a result of a fall from a terrace. Aniruddha Roy, "Revolt of Sobha Singh: A Case Study," *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 88 (July-Dec. 1969, Jan.-June 1970), pp. 218–19. Jadunath Sarkar cited Mughal evidence that Shova Singh was alive in September 1698, which casts doubt on the story that he was killed in 1696. *History of Aurangzib Based on Original Sources*, vol. V (2nd edn., Calcutta, 1952), p. 308.

12 Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 371.

ungrateful, and vengeful.[13] The editor of the *Siyar* wrote that women "always preferred a well to an Afghan" and that both officers and their soldiers "swarm with vermin."[14]

In the autumn of 1696, the rebels advanced through Nadia with a force of 10,000 cavalry and 60,000 infantry to north Bengal where they captured Makhsusabad, Malda, and Rajmahal, each of which had European trading factories nearby. By March 1697, they held the whole west bank of the Bhagirathi river, about 180 miles in length, and much of the territory to the west.

Emperor Aurangzib was furious when he learned of the ineffectiveness of the Bengal government's response to the revolt. He dispatched reinforcements to Bengal and appointed his grandson, Muhammad Azim-ud-din, as subahdar of Bengal. However, Prince Azim proved a dilatory general. Like other members of the royal family, he was watching events outside Bengal and anticipating the succession struggle upon his grandfather's demise. His campaign was handicapped by jealousies between Mughal officers and he dallied at Burdwan for almost a year. Not until September 1698 did Azim's army defeat and kill Rahim near Chandrakona and bring an end to the rebellion.[15]

Prince Azim then went to Pir Bahram's tomb in Burdwan to offer gratitude to Allah and to distribute alms to the poor.[16] Azim restored Jagatram Rai to the zamindari of Burdwan and Azim's grandfather, Aurangzib, confirmed the appointment, recognizing Jagat as the zamindar and chaudhuri of fifty mahals, four more than held by his father.[17] Prince Azim took up residence in the Burdwan fort and built a new public mosque in the town. The subahdar may have wanted to keep under surveillance those people who had supported Shova Singh and Rahim Khan and he may have sought proximity to the lucrative Hughli trade in which he and his officers were engaged. Burdwan became the virtual capital of Bengal for close to three years during Prince Azim's stay.[18]

On first sight, the revolt of Shova Singh and Rahim Khan might have suggested that Bengal, like other parts of the empire, was entering a period of zamindar-led peasant revolts against a demoralized and divided imperial ruling class. Certainly, the failure of the Bengal government to protect its subordinate zamindars or to suppress the rebellion promptly indicated a deterioration in mansabdari discipline. That the faujdar of Hughli was so preoccupied with private trade that he neglected the town's defenses illustrated the allure of the export trade and the reorientation in the priorities of mansabdars stationed in

[13] Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, pp. 437-38.
[14] Ibid., vol. III, pp. 349-50.
[15] Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 395.
[16] Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 389.
[17] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 119. In this area a mahal was not equivalent to a pargana.
[18] Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 390.

Bengal. Yet in contrast to the Jat, Satnami, Sikh, and Maratha revolts in northern and western India, the Bengal disturbance was a single episode rather than the beginning of a process of local upheaval. Little is known about the composition of the rebel forces in Bengal but apparently Afghans rather than discontented Bengali peasants were the main source of their strength. The revolt was immediately followed not by further rebellions but by a tightening of Mughal control and a restoration of administrative discipline.

One of the consequences of the revolt in Bengal was the fortification of the European trading factories in the province. After Rahim Khan's army looted Hughli and seized the European factories at Qasimbazar, Malda, and Rajmahal, the European companies increased their hiring of Indian mercenaries and requested permission to fortify their factories at Chinsura, Chandarnagar, and Sutanuti.[19]

The belief that fortifications were necessary to protect factories from local rebellions and raiders and better to resist the frequent Mughal demands for duties and bribes was by no means new.[20] The difference was that in 1698, the subahdar allowed the English, Danes, and Dutch to fortify themselves. An English delegation visited Prince Azim at Burdwan in July, paid him Rs. 16,000, and obtained permission to complete their fort and to rent the villages of Kalikata, Govindpur, and Sutanuti. Almost two years later, the East India Company also received a renewal of their duty-free trading privileges.[21] With their fort, the English were in a better position to protect their trade and their Indian partners.

More important for the immediate future of the zamindars of Bengal was the appointment of Murshid Quli Khan[22] as diwan or chief financial officer in 1700. Aurangzib selected him to tighten the administration and to increase the flow of revenues to the emperor's faltering campaign in the Deccan where the imperial officers' pay was three years in arrears. In the quarter of a century between Murshid Quli's arrival in Bengal and his death, he significantly strengthened the zamindars of Burdwan, Dinajpur, Nadia, and Rajshahi at the expense of both their neighboring zamindars and the non-Bengali Mughal mansabdars. As we have seen, this process was the result of personal animosities between Murshid Quli and his fellow mansabdars and of new administrative policies. The older mansabdars distrusted him for a combination of reasons including his strict methods of discipline, his *arriviste* background as an Indian-born Brahmin convert to Islam and a Shi'a, his favoritism to his Shi'a

[19] Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, pp. 1–3, and Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 305.
[20] Wilson, *Early Annals*, vol. I, p. 89.
[21] Ibid., p. 150.
[22] He was known as Kartalab Khan at the time of his appointment but received the title of Murshid Quli Khan from Aurangzib in about 1703.

Persian relatives, and his transfer of mansabdari jagirs to Orissa. Murshid Quli's policy of allowing particular zamindars to swallow up the surrounding small estates apparently was designed to build a counter-weight to the distrustful and jealous mansabdars and to develop a more efficient mechanism of revenue extraction.

The Burdwan zamindari's growth in the early decades of the eighteenth century resembled the expansion of Dinajpur, Nadia, and Rajshahi (Nator). In each case, the expanding zamindars used a combination of administrative and military means to gain revenue-collecting rights over their neighbors. In some cases, they annexed adjoining zamindaris through force of arms and then applied to the nazim and through him to the emperor at Delhi for confirmation. In other cases, the transfer was effected after their neighbors fell into arrears, disobeyed the nazim's orders, or failed to produce an heir. Occasionally, a zamindari was expanded through purchase. In some cases, the previous zamindars were left in control of their forfeited lands as subordinate chiefs or revenue collectors while in others they were replaced and left to exist on what few villages and revenue-free lands they had succeeded in retaining. In the Burdwan example, expansion was pushing settled agriculture and caste-based social organization into jungly areas that had been more exclusively tribal and nomadic.

The most abrupt and extensive growth of a zamindari in the early decades of the eighteenth century was the Nator raj of Rajshahi which by the 1760s covered almost 13,000 square miles with over 16,000 villages, mostly to the north and east of Murshidabad. Its founder was a Varendra Brahmin named Raghunandan who was employed by Darpanarayan Roy, one of the two Mughal sadr qanungos. Murshid Quli Khan was so impressed with Raghunandan's abilities that he made him his "most trusted counsellor in revenue matters" while Raghunandan's brother, Ramjiban, assembled the family's gigantic and scattered estate until his death in 1730.[23]

The Dinajpur zamindari in northern Bengal dates back to the first half of the seventeenth century when another employee of the qanungo department, a north Indian Kayastha, began to accumulate land. Its holder from *c.* 1682 to 1733, Prannath, "enormously expanded the zamindari by seizing all the smaller zamindaris in the neighborhood, some twelve in number," as well as more distant ones. His son, Ramnath, "even more warlike" than his father, continued the expansion from 1733 to 1760. By 1765-66, the Dinajpur zamindari covered 4,119 square miles.[24]

[23] Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 70; Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 414; Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 120.

[24] Ray, *Change*, p. 176.

The Nadia zamindari was neither new nor huge but it did grow during Murshid Quli Khan's rule. In terms of social status, the raja of Nadia probably stood first in Bengal. The Brahmin raj family traced its ancestry and the origin of its estate back to Bhattanarayan, chief of the five Brahmins who came from Kanauj in the time of Adisura (AD1032). In Akbar's reign, Raja Durgadas of Nadia assisted Raja Man Singh, the Mughal governor, in subduing Raja Pratapaditya. As a reward, Emperor Jahangir gave him the title of maharaja and confirmed him in charge of his father's estate which consisted of fourteen parganas.[25] Although Ramjiban and his son, Raghuram, zamindars under Murshid Quli, spent years in Mughal prisons, apparently for arrears, they increased the zamindari's size to its mid-eighteenth-century size of over 3,000 square miles and 3,400 villages.[26]

Three other large but non-expanding zamindaris of early eighteenth-century western Bengal remain to be mentioned: Birbhum, Bishnupur, and Pachet. All three occupied a special status in the early eighteenth century, being relatively free of Mughal interference and enjoying light revenue assessments, without efforts to determine their true revenue capacity. None was favored by Murshid Quli Khan or his successors with new territories. The raja of each was often exempt from the usual requirement of zamindari attendance at puniyas in Murshidabad. The Birbhum rajas were Afghan Pathans. Covering close to 4,000 square miles, the Birbhum zamindari was lightly assessed, presumably because much of it was held on low-rent military tenures by up-country soldiers who were expected to block incursions from southern Bihar.[27] The rajas of Bishnupur were almost certainly descended from the aboriginal Bagdis although their family legends claimed they were north Indian Kshatriyas from near Brindaban who settled in Bengal while on a pilgrimage to Puri in the seventh century. In the eighteenth century, their territories were under pressure from the expanding Burdwan zamindari to the north. By the start of Company rule they had been reduced to 1,256 square miles.[28] Pachet, to the west of Bishnupur in modern Manbhum district, was only a nominal part of Mughal Bengal. Its 2,779 square miles and sparse tribal population paid a small peshkash (tribute).[29]

Thus, at the time of Shova Singh's rebellion in 1696, the small Burdwan zamindari had as neighbors Bengal's largest Muslim zamindari, Birbhum, to the north, the tributary zamindaris of Bishnupur and Pachet to its south and southwest, and numerous smaller zamindaris in the richer plains towards the

[25] J.H.E. Garrett, *BDG: Nadia*, (Calcutta, 1910), p. 26; W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. II, pp. 146–48; and James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 196 and 359.
[26] James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 359 and 361-63.
[27] Ibid., p. 224.
[28] Ibid., p. 396.
[29] Ibid., pp. 398–99.

Bhagirathi or Hughli river in the east. Following the suppression of Rahim Khan, during Prince Azim-ud-din's residence in Burdwan, Jagatram Rai returned to Burdwan from Dacca to take charge of his dead father's zamindari. Aurangzib gave Jagatram a farman in 1699, confirming him as "Zamindar and Chaudhuri of Parganas Burdwan, etc." consisting of fifty mahals, in return for a nazrana of Rs. 1 lakh. However, like his father he met a tragic end. In 1702 while bathing in the Krishnasagar, the tank excavated by Krishnaram, he was assassinated.[30] According to a 1774 letter from Rani Bishnukumari, the killer was one of his own zamindari officers.[31] His motive is not known.

Jagatram was succeeded by Kirtichandra Rai, who was said by Burdwan family tradition to be Jagat's eldest son but more likely was "collaterally related."[32] Aurangzib confirmed the succession to forty-nine mahals with a farman in 1703-04. Kirtichandra was an ambitious, energetic warrior who enjoyed the confidence of Murshid Quli Khan and Shuja-ud-din and who added more land to the Burdwan zamindari than any other member of the line. It is not recorded why Kirtichandra in particular, among the hundreds of zamindars in Bengal, benefited from Murshid Quli Khan's policy of centralizing western and central Bengal's revenue collections in the hands of a small number of powerful zamindars. There is on record the fact that Abu Rai had helped a distressed Mughal faujdar with provisions and that Krishnaram Rai had resisted Shova Singh in 1696. It may be that the family's losses during that rebellion and the bravery of Krishnaram's daughter in killing Shova Singh aroused the sympathy and admiration of high Mughal officials. It may also be that the subahdar, Prince Azim-ud-din, developed respect for Kirtichandra while living in Burdwan from late 1698. However, Azim-ud-din was absent from Bengal from 1703 until the end of his subahdarship in 1712 and Murshid Quli had effective control of the revenue administration almost from his arrival in late 1700 or early 1701. We know that Murshid Quli was appointed faujdar of Burdwan and Midnapur in July 1701.[33] Probably Murshid Quli was so busy with his other duties that his faujdari responsibilities were exercised by a subordinate mansabdar. Yet Murshid Quli was camped at Burdwan when the East India Company decided, in January 1705, to pay the Rs. 20,000 as part of

[30] *Burdwan Handbook*, p. 9.

[31] Rani of Burdwan to Warren Hastings, 27 Dec. 1774, extract of Rev. Consult., 30 Dec. 1774, Eleventh Report from the Select Committee Appointed to Take into Consideration the State of the Administration of Justice in the Provinces of Bengal, Bahar, and Orissa, 1783, *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, vol. VI, *East Indies–1783* (London, 1806), pp. 733–34. Hereafter cited as Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783.

[32] James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 267. A Company memorandum on "Zemindarry Inheritance" stated flatly that Jagat was Krishnaram's brother. App. 15, BOR Prog., 2 April 1788, vol. 128.

[33] Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 3.

the present he demanded in return for a sanad for trading privileges.[34] It is evident that Murshid Quli and his officers had ample opportunity to assess Kirtichandra's ability and loyalty and that when Kirtichandra's neighboring zamindars failed to pay enhanced revenue demands or otherwise displeased the diwan, Murshid Quli allowed the Burdwan raja to occupy their holdings and become responsible for the revenue.

The growth of the Burdwan zamindari under Kirtichandra (1702-40) was spectacular. From a holding of six or seven parganas at the time of his accession, by the Mughal settlement of 1728 the zamindari had grown to fifty-six parganas.[35] Thus, by 1728 the Burdwan zamindari covered most of Burdwan chakla (one of the thirteen districts into which Murshid Quli divided Bengal) or most of the modern district of Burdwan and a considerable part of Hughli district as well. In terms of revenue demand, at Rs. 20,47,506 Burdwan's was the largest of any zamindari in Bengal in 1728. Rajshahi, at almost Rs. 17,00,000, was the only other zamindari that approached Burdwan's assessment.[36]

No record survives that explains how Kirtichandra obtained most of his new parganas. It is reasonable to assume that most were acquired by administrative transfers that did not disrupt local hierarchies of landholders and revenue collectors. Murshid Quli Khan governed Bengal with a strong hand and it is unlikely that he would have tolerated unilateral annexations on such a vast scale. Moreover, if Kirtichandra had conducted military campaigns in the eastern sections of Burdwan district, the Persian chronicles, reports from European factories along the Bhagirathi river, and the histories of local gentry families would surely have mentioned them. Nevertheless, the surviving fragments of information about Kirtichandra's annexations pertain mostly to military conquests to the south and southeast of Burdwan town, away from the Bhagirathi, in the northern section of modern Midnapur district and the western sections of modern Hughli and Howrah districts. This is an agriculturally rich and highly populated area through which the seasonally navigable Damodar and Silai-Rupnarayan rivers flowed on their southerly course to join the lower Hughli river. The area was an important center of weaving and sugar production from the late 1600s on. Because of this, in the 1700s the British, Dutch, and French maintained factories at towns and villages here, including Chandrakona, Ghatal, Radhanagar, and Khirpai. The *doab* (the area between two rivers) between the lower reaches of the Damodar and Rupnarayan was also a major salt-manufacturing area in this period.

Kirtichandra's first recorded annexations were by military conquest, prob-

34 Wilson, *Early Annals*, vol. I, p. 266.
35 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 410–12.
36 The assessments were exclusive of abwabs. Ibid, pp. 194–201.

ably in 1702-03, and were accomplished with the aid of "a large army" of the Mughals, according to the 1736-37 farman from Emperor Muhammad Shah. They occurred in the area controlled by Shova Singh prior to his rebellion. Kirtichandra took parts of the parganas of Chitwa, Barda, and Chandrakona, corresponding roughly to the modern thanas of Daspur, Ghatal, and Chandrakona, respectively, in northern Midnapur district. Kirtichandra placed Chandrakona town and fort under the charge of his brother-in-law, Ramji Babu, and built the 60-foot-high, five-turret Malleswar temple over a spring and shrine reputed to be much older. Kirtichandra or his successor donated a debottar (revenue-free) estate to support the rituals of the Raghunathji and Lalji temples there.[37] This was a pattern repeated by the Burdwan rajas. After acquiring a new zamindari, they built new temples, restored or added walls, gates, or other structures to old shrines, and endowed additional lands for the support of the customary Vaishnava, Shaivite, and other religious ceremonies. The new territories were ritually as well as administratively incorporated into the Burdwan raj.

In 1718, Kirtichandra annexed from the Bishnupur zamindari a further part of pargana Chandrakona and the adjoining pargana Bagri (modern Garhbeta in northern Midnapur district) to the west, as well as Raipur (southeastern part of modern Bankura district). This war with Bishnupur was a complicated affair which will be described briefly because it illustrates how the complex politics of zamindari encroachment and estate building was sometimes facilitated by the presence of disaffected parties within the victim zamindari. Both Bagri and Raipur in 1718 were governed by Chauhan Rajput chiefs who had come to Bengal with the Mughals and were subordinate to the raja of Bishnupur. Both Bagri and Raipur were hilly, jungly areas with nominal revenue obligations and sparse populations. The Bagri chief was feudatory to Bishnupur; he had under him eighteen *nayaka* ghatwals or feudatory warriors to guard the passes leading into neighboring chiefdoms. In 1718, the eighteen *nayakas* (who were probably non-Bengalis) broke away from the Bagri chief and the Bishnupur raja, and they joined Kirtichandra in a war against the raja of Bishnupur.[38] The cause of the war is unknown but the consequence was the addition of Bagri and an additional section of pargana Chandrakona to the Burdwan zamindari.

Kirtichandra's attack on the raja of Bishnupur was described by one history of the Burdwan raj as his "boldest achievement."[39] On the other hand, a history

[37] A. Mitra, *Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks: Midnapur* (Alipore, 1953), p. cii–iv.

[38] W.B. Bayley, "Report on Boggraee," 15 Sept. 1815, J.P. Crim. Prog. 56 of 29 Dec. 1815, vol. 356. *Nayaka* is a Sanskrit term for a leader, usually military. It was used widely for warriors in medieval south India. Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1980), p. 407.

[39] [Anonymous], "The Territorial Aristocracy of Bengal: The Bardwan Raj," *Calcutta Review*, vol. 59, no. 108 (1872), p. 174.

of the Bishnupur raj claims that when Kirtichandra attacked Bishnupur town, he was "totally repulsed."[40] It seems clear that Kirtichandra did invade Bishnupur, that he annexed feudatories on Bishnupur's borders, that he built a temple to Raghunathji at Rajganj after defeating the raja of Bishnupur,[41] but that he left the central territory of Bishnupur intact. It is likely that Murshid Quli Khan would not have tolerated an effort to annex a major zamindari that had not given offense to the Mughal government.

After the annexation of parts of Bagri and Chandrakona in 1718, Kirtichandra appointed Dasu Nayaka, the chief of the eighteen Nayakas, to collect the revenue of both parganas. But in 1735-36, Dasu rebelled and withheld his revenue, apparently because the Burdwan raja sent a new shiqdar (revenue collector) to Chandrakona.[42] Kirtichandra regarded the people of Bagri to be "turbulent" and "principally chooars" or robbers. The raja's diwan, Manikchandra, sent troops to subdue Dasu. They slew Dasu and brought his head back to Burdwan. A year later, Kirtichandra confirmed Dasu's two sons as dependent, tributary jagirdars of Bagri, "obeying every order of the Rajah of Burdwan." The sons accompanied Kirtichandra on a pilgrimage to the Jagannath temple at Puri. Afterwards, Fateh Singh, the younger son, returned to Burdwan, received a siropa (a Mughal dress of honor) from the raja, and was appointed commander of the Chandrakona fort, with command of four horse and twenty-five foot soldiers.[43] Bagri remained part of the Burdwan zamindari, except for a short interlude, until it was sold for arrears of revenue in 1797. Its hereditary holders styled themselves raja, and were in effect feudatories of the rajas of Burdwan.

Kirtichandra's annexations in western Hughli and Howrah districts were along the Damodar river, south and southeast of Burdwan town. Balgarhi pargana lay on both sides of the Damodar. The Balgarhi raj family were recent immigrants to Bengal, having migrated from Awadh in the late 1600s or early 1700s. Legend says that Raja Vishnu Das brought with him 500 followers of his own "Kshatriya" caste and 100 Kanauj Brahmins. The family's fame rests on founding and providing the first mahants (chief priests) of the Tarakeswar temple, the foremost Shaivite center in Bengal. As many Shiva *lingams* (phallic symbols) were throughout India, legend says the Tarakeswar lingam was *swayambhu* or self-revealed. After Raja Vishnu Das settled in Balgarhi, his brother Varamal Singh, who was a religious mendicant, noticed that cows were shedding their milk on a stone in the jungle. Recognizing the stone as Shiva's

[40] Mallik, *History of Bishnupur-Raj*, p. 47.
[41] Rakhaldas Mukhopadhyay, *Bardhamaner Rajavamsanucarita* (Calcutta, 1914), p. 31.
[42] Paper on the zamindari of Bagri, delivered by the vakil of Jadu Singh of Bagri, Burdwan PCOR, 16 March 1779, vol. 28.
[43] Ibid. Also paper on Bagri from the raja of Burdwan, Burdwan PCOR, 16 March 1779, and J. Kinloch, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 14 March 1787, BOR Prog., vol. 13.

lingam, the two brothers then built a temple over the stone at Tarakeswar and Varamal became the mahant (head) of the temple, as well as the chief mahant of the Dasnami order of *sannyasis* (ascetics) which had subordinate orders in many villages of west Bengal. The later mahants of the Dasnami orders were north Indian Brahmins.[44]

There seems to be no record of the motive or circumstances of Burdwan's incorporation of Balgarhi. Presumably, the Burdwan rajas welcomed the acquisition of the area around a Shiva shrine of considerable popularity and that in the mid-nineteenth century, at least, attracted 20,000 pilgrims for the annual Shivaratri festivals. Shiva worship at Tarakeswar was open to women and to all castes.[45]

Another of Kirtichandra's major forcible annexations was the ancient zamindari of Bhursut, immediately south of Balgarhi. The Bengali Brahmin zamindars of Bhursut lived in the village of Bhabanipur on the bank of the Damodar in modern Howrah district. They had displaced the Bagdi rajas in the first half of the sixteenth century.[46] Bhabanipur was the site of a Dasnami Shaivite math (residence of ascetic order) that was subordinate to the chief Dasnami math of Tarakeswar. The Bhabanipur math had been endowed with lands by the raja of Bhursut in 1685. But there was nothing narrowly sectarian about the Bhursut rajas. With the eclecticism and perhaps the competitive ingenuity that a number of Bengali zamindars displayed, they built an unusual two-storied temple inside their fort to house the images of no less than twelve Shaivite and Vaishnava deities.[47]

Kirtichandra not only seized Bhursut in 1712, he also "looted the palace and treasury and carried away the family deities" to Burdwan. The Bhursut raj family left Bhabanipur and settled several miles to the east at Basantpur near a collateral branch of the family who lived at Penro (Par Radhanagar) with a large fortress surrounded by a moat. At Basantpur, the reduced circumstances of the family apparently aroused the sympathy of the rajas of Burdwan, Bansberia, and Nadia, who each gave the family rent-free lands.[48] However, after Kirtichandra's death in 1740, the Burdwan zamindari confiscated most of the remaining lands of Narendra Narayan Ray of Basantpur, who was the father of the poet Bharatchandra.[49]

The annexations mentioned above were achieved through force of arms. A

[44] L.S.S. O'Malley and Monmohan Chakravarti, *BDG: Hooghly* (Calcutta, 1912), pp. 321–33, and A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly*, pp. 209 and 724–26.
[45] Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. III, pp. 326–27.
[46] A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Howrah* (Calcutta, 1972), p. 81.
[47] Ibid., pp. 593–94.
[48] Ibid., pp. 461, 593, and 610.
[49] Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, p. 558.

history of the Burdwan raj lists specifically those zamindaris seized militarily by Kirtichandra and says that the annual revenue demand under the 1728 settlement for these territories was Rs. 4,41,161 or over one fifth of the zamindari's total revenue obligation. The list includes not only the major parganas mentioned above but also Monoharshahi[50] which was in chakla Murshidabad.

The nazims' favoritism to Burdwan was revealed both by their enabling the zamindari to expand and in allowing Kirtichandra considerable autonomy in his internal estate management. Localization of power was a general phenomenon in the first half of the eighteenth century as the role of faujdars shrank while the territories of a handful of zamindars grew. But Kirtichandra was specially favored. Apparently alone among the zamindars of Bengal, he was allowed to assume police and criminal judicial powers, including the right to retain fines, which had previously been reserved to the nazim's own officers.[51] Until 1726, the nazims stationed faujdari officials in the thanas (police jurisdictions) in Burdwan, as in other zamindaris, to check crime and arrest miscreants. However, in 1726-27, 1730-31, and 1741-42, the nazims surrendered police and criminal justice authority to the Burdwan rajas in return for higher revenue payments.[52] With these transfers of faujdari powers, the nazim's authority within the Burdwan zamindari was reduced although as late as 1734-35, the father of the chronicler, Karam Ali, arrived from Delhi and was appointed news-writer of Burdwan chakla on a salary of Rs. 200. The post remained in the family until 1772[53] and was one of the agencies by which the nazims gathered intelligence about zamindari affairs.

Kirtichandra's success in extending his territory and securing the Mughal revenues probably could not have been achieved without ruthlessness. Nor could he have expanded without diplomatic skill and the symbolic actions of piety and liberality expected of Hindu rajas, ruthless or not. He built a number of Shiva temples and donated revenue-free land to support both Shaivite and Vaishnava deities.[54] On the 1732 Shiva temple at Baikunthapur, the village in which Sangam Rai had first settled, his dedicatory inscription contains a *double entendre* phrase that may be read, depending where the reader breaks it, as dedicated either "by the instructor of the good" (*shastra satam*) or "by the

[50] Mukhopadhyay, *Bardhamaner*, p. 23.

[51] Company civil servants debated in the 1770s whether zamindars had exercised criminal judicial powers. Warren Hastings reversed his earlier opinion and concluded in 1775 that the Burdwan rajas were exceptional in being the only instance he knew of with "a Foujedarry Jurisdiction." Minute of 7 Dec. 1775, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, App. 15, p. 940.

[52] Diwan Bhawani Mitra's report on the faujdari of Burdwan. Prog. of 29 May 1775, Bengal Rev. Consult., P/49/53.

[53] Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 10.

[54] Mukhopadhyay, *Bardhamaner*, p. 25.

punisher of the wicked" (*shastra asatam*).[55] The ambiguity nicely captures the complementary functions (dana and danda) of the ideal raja. Other epithets in the inscription describe Kirtichandra as "the moon of all glory (or good deeds)," "the jewel among all kings," and as "the protector of the *dharma* of Brahmins."[56]

The Burdwan raj faced the common problem of new rulers seeking to pacify new territories. It needed to offset its unpopular extractive functions with ritual, piety, and patronage amid a population vitally interested in its puja cycles and conditioned to expect few benefits from a change of administration in a provincial or zamindari capital. It is true that the Burdwan rajas had formidable powers of patronage with which to attract loyal subjects. They had the ability to appoint or confirm tens of thousands of people in their revenue-collecting, judicial, peace-keeping, embankment, and household departments. But looking beyond this significant group of dependents, there is reason to question the degree to which the local population looked upon government institutions and their agents, such as zamindars, as the principal source of prosperity and dharmic order. Despite their patronage, zamindars were frequently experienced as inhibitors of wellbeing. The impression conveyed by reading pre-colonial literary works and modern district gazetteers and by listening to Burdwan-area villagers discuss their communities' past is that the agency of the deities and pious individuals was far more deeply implanted in folk memories than the agency of the Burdwan rajas. The territory of the Burdwan raj was thick with highly localized traditions of special sanctity to sectarian groups. These traditions pre-dated the Burdwan raj, endured after zamindari abolition, and, for the most part, ignored temporal power. In particular, the theology of Bengali Vaishnavism, which spread through the area in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, disassociates divinity from "prestige or power" and implies that "the divine does not express itself in any essential way through history, nature, or creation-maintenance-destruction of the world."[57]

The sacred traditions that may have reinforced the notion that local puja and piety mattered more than sacral kingship and temporal power included a sacred geography that honored the places in which mythic individuals lived, performed miracles, or experienced revelations. For example, in western Burdwan Pandaveshvar village was thought to have been the home of the five Pandava brothers during their exile prior to the Mahabharata war.[58] In northeastern Burdwan, sacred memories of Chaitanya and his followers were linked to Dainhat, Denur, Ekchaka, Kalna, Katwa, and Ketugram. In the same area were

[55] A.K. Bhattacharyya, *A Corpus of Dedicatory Inscriptions from Temples of West Bengal (c. 1500 A.D. to c. 1800 A.D.)* (Calcutta, 1982), p. 130.

[56] Ibid., p. 8.

[57] Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, p. 72.

[58] Government of West Bengal, *WBDG: Barddhaman* (Calcutta, forthcoming), p. 595.

several Shakta *pithas* (sacred places) where parts of Sati's (Shiva's wife) body fell to earth. Saspur, near Kalna, and Burdwan town contained *dargas* (graves) of Muslim pirs worshiped by Muslims and Hindus.[59] Numerous other communities also took pride in having their puniya (merit) increased by the presence of deities, learned communities, pious individuals, and miraculous events that preceded the creation of the Burdwan raj and that for many villagers fit into a higher and less ambivalent order of value than the dharmic and extractive activities of Hindu kings.

The late eighteenth-century Burdwan raj was know to be Shaivite but for the century's middle decades the evidence suggests strong Vaishnava orientation. We have seen that Kirtichandra once made a pilgrimage to the Vaishnava temple at Puri; in 1730, his mother Brajakishori also went, carrying an order from Nazim Shuja-ud-din to local functionaries (ghatwals and *faridars*, heads of police outposts), requiring them to guarantee the safety of the party which included fifteen palanquins for women and ten for men.[60] In 1739, Kirtichandra's mother dedicated a Lalji temple at Kalna to Radha and Krishna. It was large (*c.* 54 feet square), with three tiers and twenty-five pinnacles (*pancavimshati-ratna*).[61] Kirtichandra and his son, Chitrasen, had a Vaishnava guru, Bhaktalal Gosvami, who built a Radha temple at Mankur.[62]

Kirtichandra's name is associated with non-temple construction projects as well. According to a legend, he ordered the excavation of a large tank near Katwa after he asked for drinking water while on his way to Murshidabad and discovered there was little water locally available. Kirtichandra had requested the water from a boy and then promised to excavate a tank as long as the distance the boy could cover in one dash. Kirtichandra then marked the distance with his spear and left. A few days later, a thousand laborers arrived and dug the tank which apparently was named after the boy who fetched the water.[63]

While Burdwan town remained the raj's administrative headquarters, Kirtichandra made Kalna the center of the family's devotional activities, on the bank of the purifying Bhagirathi river. He, or one of his successors, constructed "a rest house, an elephant-shed, two Siva temples, and a tank" at 8 mile intervals along the Burdwan–Kalna road.[64] At Kalna, the family also built small structures adjoining the palace for the display of the remains and royal paraphernalia of deceased rajas and ranis, as they had done at Dainhat prior to Kirtichandra.

59 Ibid., pp. 582-92.
60 Mukhopadhyay, *Bardhamaner*, pp. 32–33.
61 Bhattacharyya, *A Corpus of Dedicatory Inscriptions*, p. 133; David J. McCutchion, *Late Mediaeval Temples of Bengal: Origins and Classification* (Calcutta, 1972), p. 56.
62 Government of West Bengal, *WBDG: Barddhaman*, p. 594.
63 Mukhopadhyay, *Bardhamaner*, pp. 25-26.
64 Government of West Bengal, *WBDG: Barddhaman*, p. 309.

The family's offerings of food and changes of clothes resembled the puja activities by Bengalis at many temples dedicated to deities and may have been attempts at deification:

There is a separate building for each Maharaja or Maharani, in which is kept the bones remaining from the funeral pyre, together with all the personal belongings of the deceased ... The cooking and eating vessels of the Maharani, used by her in her lifetime, with her umbrella, fans, scentholders, etc., are placed round her remains. The remains of the late Maharaja Mahtab Chand are dressed in the clothes which he used during his life, which are changed three times a day. They are regarded as if the Maharaja was living himself and are placed on a velvet state cushion with silver salver, tumblers, *hookahs*, and *atar* holders, just as the late Maharaja used to sit with all the paraphernalia of state about him. They are surrounded by his utensils, chowries, walking stick and all the articles daily used by him in life; in another room is shown his office table with the inkstand, pens, waste paper basket, etc., used by him; in another the bed which he used. The meals which they used to take in life are offered to the remains daily and are then distributed to the poor.[65]

When Kirtichandra died in 1740, he left behind an immense, profitable estate containing some of the richest alluvial agricultural land in west Bengal. Its well-populated villages, with their expert weavers and agriculturalists, benefited from their proximity to the trading entrepots along the Bhagirathi and from the communities of literate, high caste families in the eastern parganas which were a major source of employees to the Mughal government, the Burdwan raj, and the European trading companies. Sanskrit and Arabic/Persian seminaries and tutors dotted the banks of the Bhagirathi and their immediate hinterland and trained both learned Brahmins and administrators literate in Persian who aided the Burdwan raj in integrating its territory into the Hindu–Persian pattern of zamindari life. The study of Persian was widely recognized as a passport to professional advancement for not only was it the language of higher administration, few of the peripatetic mansabdars mastered Bengali. The emergence of a bilingual intelligentsia was reflected in the well-known rhyme recited by village Hindu girls as they drew with powder on the floor the symbol of a mirror:

Arshi, arshi, arshi,
Amar shyami paruk Farsi.
(Mirror, mirror, mirror,
Let my husband-to-be learn Persian.)[66]

Kirtichandra also left a legacy of efficient, loyal service to his masters in Murshidabad. Dozens of his neighbors incurred the wrath of Murshid Quli Khan or Shuja-ud-din. In 1736, Raja Badi-ul-Zaman of Birbhum withheld his reve-

65 J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan*, pp. 197–98.
66 On the spread of Persian, see Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 223.

nue, rebelled, and saw his zamindari invaded by troops from Patna and Murshidabad. Only a visit of submission to Murshidabad, a promise of an extra Rs. 3 lakhs annually,[67] and Kirtichandra's willingness to act as security for the payment of the Birbhum revenues saved Badi-ul-Zaman's zamindari.[68] Rajas Ramjiban, Ramkrishna, and Raghuram of Nadia were all imprisoned, apparently for revenue arrears.[69] Raja Raghunath Singh II of Bishnupur suffered from both Mughal severity and domestic trouble. Bishnupur lost land to Burdwan because of his failure to collect revenue from Shova Singh, as we have seen. Raghunath was said by a popular legend to have been murdered in 1730 in a conspiracy led by his eldest rani on account of Raghunath's infatuation with a Muslim courtesan named Lal Bai whom he had obtained in military action against Shova Singh decades earlier. The conspiring rani became a *sati* (a widow burned) on Raghunath's funeral pyre, according to this well-known story.[70] By contrast, Kirtichandra is not known to have lost any land or suffered family dissension. At least once, in 1730-31, he was imprisoned in Murshidabad for arrears.[71]

Chitrasen Rai succeeded his father as zamindar of Burdwan in 1740 and received a farman from the titular Mughal emperor which conferred the title of raja. He was the first member of the line so honored. His brief reign was overshadowed by the start of the devastating Maratha invasions in 1742, which are discussed in the next chapter. Before his death in 1744, Chitrasen and his diwan, Manikchandra, who apparently managed his revenue and military affairs, added still more territories. Precisely what they acquired is uncertain. A Burdwan raj family tradition credits Chitrasen with obtaining "the parganas of Mandalghat, Arsa, and Chandrakona," all to the south and southeast of Burdwan town.[72] But there is evidence that Mandalghat and Chandrakona became part of the zamindari long before Chitrasen's accession.[73] Chitrasen's major annexations seem to have been the Arsa zamindari in eastern Hughli district and the Gopbhum and Shergarh regions of western Burdwan.

In the late seventeenth century, Arsa had been part of one of the largest and most important zamindaris in Bengal, adjoining the trading ports of Chinsura and Hughli and extending along both banks of the Bhagirathi. However, Bengali rules of inheritance and Mughal decisions, including the 1690 grant of the

[67] D. Majumdar, *WBDG: Birbhum*, p. 106.
[68] [Allah], *Narrative*, p. 151.
[69] James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 359, and Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. II, pp. 151–54.
[70] The rani's motive for conspiring was not jealousy but outrage that Raghunath fed food prepared by Lal Bai to Hindus of Bishnupur. A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Bankura*, pp. 98–99.
[71] Letter from Raja Tejchandra of Burdwan, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 29 Jan. 1776, vol. 12.
[72] *Burdwan Handbook*, p. 9.
[73] Rouse, *Dissertation*, p. 224.

villages of Kalikata, Gobindapur, and Sutanuti to the English, led to the partition and diminution of this major estate. It was the Arsa section of the estate, consisting of one third of the Kayastha family's original zamindari, that Burdwan obtained in 1742. When Raja Raghudeb's son, Gobindadeb, died in 1740-41, Manikchandra, the Burdwan raj diwan, informed the nazim that there was no heir.[74] The nazim agreed to transfer the Arsa zamindari to Chitrasen "in consideration of his having furnished a supply of grain" to the nawab's army during the first Maratha invasion earlier that year.[75]

The other area Chitrasen is believed to have obtained, either during his father's reign or his own, was the territory then known as Gopbhum and Shergarh, in the western extremity of modern Burdwan district. In the early eighteenth century, this area had been contested by the zamindars of Bishnupur, Birbhum, Panchet, and Burdwan. It contained relatively few high caste Hindus, being an area of aboriginal, low caste, and pastoral peoples, with communities of agriculturalists increasing towards the east. Shergarh, the narrow, westernmost neck of land that lies between the Damodar and Ajay rivers, now covers the Raniganj coal field but in the eighteenth century it was a jungly area inhabited by the Bauri caste. The Bauris, according to J.C.K. Peterson, were outside Hinduism and were "regarded by all orthodox Hindus as unmitigated chuars" (robbers).[76] At the time Chitrasen conquered Shergarh, it was held, at least nominally, by the raja of Birbhum although it traditionally belonged to the raja of Pachet.[77] Its main value then was military rather than economic: it was used to watch the turbulent chiefdoms and "chuars" of the western hills. Chitrasen apparently left the raja of Pachet in possession of the earthen fort at Dihi Shergarh because it still belonged to the family early in this century. He also left undisturbed many of the ghatwali or feudatory military tenures that were scattered through the western hills.[78]

The rolling, wooded headland of the central Indian hills also extended eastwards into western Gopbhum. In eastern Gopbhum, around Mankur, 23 miles west of Burdwan town, the area was generally level, unforested, and well-populated. Gopbhum contained a large concentration of the Gopa or Goala caste of cattle-herders. At least by the sixteenth century, a section of the Gopas

74 However, a posthumous son, Nrisinghadeb, was born. In 1779, Warren Hastings restored to him some ancestral lands in the Twenty-four Parganas that had not been annexed to the Burdwan zamindari. A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly*, p. 659, and L.S.S. O'Malley and M. Chakravarti, *BDG: Hooghly*, p. 252.

75 The rairayan's testimony of 2 Feb. 1788, quoted in Harrington, *An Elementary Analysis*, vol. III, p. 348.

76 J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan*, p. 81.

77 W.B. Oldham, *Some Historical and Ethnical Aspects of the Burdwan District* (Calcutta, 1891), p. 4.

78 Ibid., p. 4.

had shifted from pastoral to agricultural and trading occupations and over time separated themselves from the pastoral Gopas. By the early nineteenth century, the elevated section called themselves Sadgops or "pure" (*sat*) Gopas. The ruling families of Gopbhum before the 1740s came from this elevated section. The preeminent chiefs of Gopbhum were the rajas of Amragarh, 1 mile from Mankur. The raja of Amragarh first became a feudatory of the Burdwan raj in 1694, by order of Aurangzib. With Chitrasen's invasion of the early 1740s, the line of rajas came to an end. But the affluent group of agriculturalists now known as the Sadgops continued to prosper.[79] By the turn of this century, they ranked near the top of the Nabasakha or clean Shudra castes, they claimed to rank with the Kayasthas, and like the Kayasthas, they used the surname Ghosh.[80]

Burdwan's integration of the territory of the Sadgop rajas of Gopbhum is of ethnographic interest because of the supposed marriages between Sadgop ruling families and the Khatris of Burdwan. W.B. Oldham, a British civil servant and ethnographer, wrote in 1891 that "within the last two hundred years, if not within a still shorter period," the Burdwan Khatris formed marriage alliances with "the Sadgops of the Gopbhum dynasty," meaning the rajas of Amragarh or their subordinate, related feudatory chiefs. The Khatris then reverted to the practice of marrying Khatris only,[81] presumably to maintain their status in the eyes of up-country Khatris with whom most of their marriages were arranged. Oldham's statement was vague and did not indicate whether the Khatri–Sadgop marriages preceded or followed Chitrasen's invasion of Gopbhum. Nor did he indicate if the Burdwan raj family ever admitted to taking Sadgop wives. If Sadgop women became wives of the Burdwan rajas, presumably they were minor wives because there is no historical record or admitted Burdwan raj family memory of a Sadgop rani of Burdwan.

Oldham attributed the origin of the important Aguri caste to the Khatri–Sadgop marriages, citing the Aguris' own claim to be "the product of unions between the Khetris of the house of Burdwan and the Sadgops of the Gopbhum dynasty."[82] Here, Oldham was obviously misled because the Aguris are an old caste who are mentioned in Mukundaram's *Candi-mangala* (1589) which almost certainly pre-dates the arrival of Khatris in Burdwan. Mukundaram described the Aguris as performing "their own work, always thinking of battle. They are learned in many kinds of weaponry. They support their priest and preceptors, and never do anything wrong."[83] Even though it is unlikely that they

[79] Hitesranjan Sanyal, "Continuities of Social Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India: Two Case Studies of Caste Mobility in Bengal," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Feb. 1971), pp. 321–23.

[80] J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan*, p. 63.

[81] Oldham, *Some Historical and Ethnical Aspects*, p. 18.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Dimock and Inden, "The City in Pre-British Bengal," pp. 12–13.

originated from Khatri–Sadgop marriages, the Aguris had a special relationship with the Burdwan raj, constituting a successful caste of jotdars and small traders. They made up 4.4 percent of the district's population in 1901. Like the Khatris, they claimed Kshatriya status. But only one of their seven sub-castes wore the sacred thread and Herbert Risley ranked them with the Nabasakha castes. At the end of the nineteenth century, they were spread out through the district, mainly as prosperous cultivators although many held tenures and estates under the Burdwan raj.[84] They had a reputation for being short-tempered, violent, and tough. They seem to have been an important element in the Burdwan raj's success in consolidating its hold over its vast estate.

After Chitrasen occupied Gopbhum, he built forts at Rajgarh, near Kaksa, and at Chirulia, on the Ajay river, where he left a cannon with his name inscribed in Persian. He renamed the area around Chirulia's 40-foot-high fort pargana Senpahari, after himself. It extended across the Ajay river into modern Birbhum[85] and it may have included territory which Chitrasen or his father had seized from the rajas of Birbhum.

Little more is known about Chitrasen. In the style of his age, he apparently wished to be seen as a patron of learning and religion. He employed as court poet one of the eminent Sanskrit pandits of the time, Baneswar Vidyalankar, who left the court of raja Krishnachandra of Nadia to come to Burdwan. In 1744, Vidyalankar finished a prose and poetical composition about Chitrasen which portrayed the raja as a highly religious man who composed and recited sacred verses, performed *sandhyas* (religious rites), prostrated himself at the feet of his guru, fed and made obeisance to a cow named Ganga, and feasted Brahmins. The main story in *Chitrachampu* concerns a dream Chitrasen had after fleeing from the first Maratha invasion. In the dream, Chitrasen traveled to Brindaban, Ayodhya, and other sacred places, learned the principles of Vaishnavism, and was presented to Krishna and Radha.[86] It is not known if Chitrasen became a Vaishnava as *Chitrachampu* suggests. It was common for eighteenth-century zamindars to be catholic in their patronage and worship. We have seen that both Chitrasen's father and grandmother made pilgrimages to the Vaishnava temple in Puri, perhaps in imitation of Sangam Rai, the original immigrant from the Punjab. Chitrasen's aunt, the mother of Raja Kirtichandra, had built the Lalji temple to Radha-Krishna at Kalna in 1739. On the other hand, Chitrasen had built a Kali (Siddheshvari) temple, also at Kalna, in 1741 and his two widows each constructed a Shiva temple there in 1753.[87]

[84] Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, pp. 12–13.
[85] J.C.K. Peterson, *BDG: Burdwan*, p. 195.
[86] Baneswar Vidyalankar, *Chitrachampu*, ed. Ramcharan Chakravarti (Benares, 1940), pp. 9–36.
[87] Bhattacharyya, *A Corpus of Dedicatory Inscriptions*, pp. 4,9, and 30.

We know almost nothing about how Kirtichandra and Chitrasen managed their huge holding. Persian sources, such as the *Riaz al-Salatin, Siyar al-Mutakhkherin,* and *Tawarikh-i-Bangala*, focus on military campaigns and mansabdari and nawabi court politics and say little about individual zamindars, despite the crucial role the larger ones played in nawabi administration and revenue collection. This reflects both the independence of zamindari management from nawabi oversight and interference and the non-Bengali origin of the Persian chroniclers who, when they mentioned particular zamindars, rarely gave their names. James Grant's analysis adds little about zamindari management before Plassey, except the territorial divisions and the provincial government's revenue demands within each zamindari. The Burdwan raj family itself seems to have few documents from this period, apart from the farmans and sanads from the Mughal emperor. The Burdwan collectorate contains bundles of *taidad* papers or documents registering thousands of revenue-free holdings, mostly small in size and many fraudulent. Those were not analyzed for this study.

Despite the thinness of the sources, it is clear that from Murshid Quli Khan on, the nawabs favored the large zamindars at the expense of the small ones in western and central Bengal. They tolerated the large estates of Birbhum and Bishnupur and they encouraged the growth and internal autonomy of Burdwan, Dinajpur, Nadia, and Rajshahi, both by permitting their military annexations and by transferring small estates to their control. It is also apparent from the pattern followed after Plassey that the major zamindars governed their territories much as seventeenth-century zamindars had. The rajas displaced the rulers of some freshly acquired estates and continued others. Thus under Kirtichandra and Chitrasen, the ruling families of Shova Singh and others around Chandrakona, the zamindar of Mandalghat, and the Sadgop rajas of Amragarh disappeared from the subsequent historical record. The rajas of Bagri, Raipur, and Simlapal, remote from Burdwan, continued as feudatories while the rajas of Balgarhi, Bhursut, and Shergarh were reduced to small holdings. After a new area was annexed, the rajas of Burdwan probably continued most of the local gentry and hereditary jotdars as payers of the revenue. No other explanation is consistent with the apparent ease with which Burdwan's expansion occurred and the peace that prevailed in subsequent decades. When resistance was given, as in the Chandrakona and Gopbhum regions, the Burdwan zamindari army, and if necessary the nawab's army, ensured that the transfer of control was completed. Once the older ruling families were subdued, the rajas of Burdwan conciliated local interests and ritually integrated the areas into the Burdwan raj with revenue-free grants to Brahmins, concessionary rents for influential families, excavation of tanks, and construction and endowment of temples. In conferring subordinate revenue-collection rights, khilats, land gifts, and the means to perform Hindu rituals, the Burdwan rajas were enabling their subjects

to participate in the widely dispersed "sovereign substance of the king."[88] The zamindari militia and the forts at Rajgarh, Chirulia, and Chandrakona, and lock-up rooms in Burdwan and the scattered kacharis, on the other hand, served as reminders of where coercive power, another element of sovereignty, lay.

[88] Dirks' ("The original caste," in Marriott [ed.], *India through Hindu Categories*, p. 67) phrase for "the royal gift."

8 The Maratha invasions, 1742-1751

Chitrasen's expansion was largely completed by April 1742 when the expanding Marathas invaded Bengal from central India for the first time. The Marathas returned annually until 1751, usually withdrawing before the summer monsoon turned the fields and roads to mud and made them almost impassable for the light Maratha cavalry. The Burdwan, Bishnupur, and Birbhum zamindaris and Midnapur district felt the brunt of these destructive incursions because of their proximity to the Maratha base in central India. In the long run, the invasions had no effect on the size of the Burdwan zamindari nor is there evidence that any members of the Burdwan raj family were killed. But the invasions caused immense hardship for the people of west Bengal. They also precipitated an economic crisis and diminished the legitimacy of the Murshidabad regime. They constitute a turning point in the history of the eighteenth century.

The invasions had their principal origin in the ambitions of Raghuji Bhonsla, the Maratha chief at Nagpur, to collect chauth or a share of the revenue in territories formerly under the Mughal empire. Yet the invasions might not have occurred but for the circumstances surrounding Alivardi Khan's usurpation of power from Nawab Sarfaraz in 1740. Sarfaraz, although a weak, debauched ruler, was the grandson of Murshid Quli Khan and the son of Shuja-ud-din (1727-39) and thus had legitimate claims to the *masnad* (throne). Alivardi, by contrast, came from a Turko-Arab family of modest social position and rose through the ranks of the Bengal government by the patronage of Sarfaraz's father. Alivardi's good character and courageous leadership against the Marathas were able to overcome most of the stigma of ingratitude and treachery attached to his usurpation. However, the behavior of other members of his family contributed to the growing political alienation that culminated in the British-backed revolution of 1757.[1] Alivardi's brother, Haji Ahmad, was notorious. Upon Sarfaraz's assassination, Haji Ahmad seized for himself some of the women from Sarfaraz's harem, an act considered dishonorable by people in

[1] Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 41, suggested that "the battle of Plassey was the reply of historical justice" to Alivardi's treacherous treatment of Nawab Sarfaraz.

Alivardi's court.[2] He was also accused of abducting other women.[3] Alivardi's grandson and successor, Siraj-ud-daula (1756-57), was even more licentious. His frequent violation of families, without regard to rank, to satisfy his sexual appetites was said to have caused him to be detested widely.[4]

The main opposition to Alivardi after he overthrew Sarfaraz in 1740 came from Rastam Jang, uncle of Sarfaraz and deputy governor of Orissa who wanted to "avenge the blood of Sarfaraz.[5] Alivardi twice marched to Orissa to subdue Rastam Jang and other partisans of Sarfaraz. In the first expedition, Rastam Jang was defeated at the battle of Phulwari in March 1741 and he fled to the Deccan to the territory of Asaf Jah, *nizam-ul-mulk* of Hyderabad. But Rastam Jang's son-in-law returned to Orissa with a Maratha army and, it was believed, the *nizam*'s support, and he retook southern Orissa and also occupied Midnapur and Hijili. So Alivardi entered Orissa a second time and defeated the supporters of Rastam Jang in December 1741. Alivardi remained in Orissa for several months to consolidate his rule. In the meantime, his nephew Zain-ud-din was securing Bihar. By the spring of 1742 Alivardi's hold on Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa seemed firm. It seemed momentarily that the relative peace Bengal had experienced since Shova Singh's rebellion of 1696-97 had been restored.[6]

It was during his return towards Murshidabad in April 1742 that Alivardi learned that the Marathas had entered Bengal and were advancing eastwards towards Burdwan. This news came as a shock: Yusuf Ali described it as "a strange incident ... which no man had ever imagined in his mind."[7] The Maratha invasion was sent by Raghuji Bhonsla, the Maratha chief at Nagpur. Raghuji was encouraged to invade Bengal by the relatives of Sarfaraz and by *Nizam* Asaf Jah, it was said.[8] Raghuji saw Bengal as a prosperous province which had not been paying chauth to the Marathas as other Mughal dominions were. He therefore sent his chief minister, Bhaskar Pandit, at the head of perhaps 20,000 cavalry.[9] They entered Bengal via Pachet (modern Manbhum district) west of Burdwan.

Alivardi marched to Burdwan to intercept Bhaskar Pandit and the Marathas although he had dismissed many troops before learning of the Maratha advance. In Burdwan he camped next to Ranisagar, a tank excavated by the mother of Raja Kirtichandra. Bhaskar's troops managed to burn down much of Burdwan

[2] There were 1,500 women in the harem. Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 90.
[3] Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, p. 120. See also Datta, *Alivardi*, pp. 6-7.
[4] Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, pp. 121–22.
[5] Karim Ali, *Muzaffar-namah*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 24.
[6] Datta, *Alivardi*, pp. 41–55.
[7] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.) *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 96.
[8] Ibid. Also, Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 57.
[9] Some contemporary estimates put the number much higher.

town, seize Alivardi's baggage, and cut off his food supplies. After fruitless negotiations with Bhaskar over the amount of chauth to be paid, Alivardi and his hungry men made a desperate three-day flight, harassed by the Marathas, to the Mughal fort at Katwa, 35 miles to the northeast, and then crossed the Bhagirathi river and fled north to Murshidabad.[10] During the rout, Diwan Manikchandra's Burdwan troops deserted Alivardi but Alivardi's general, Mustafa Khan, rallied his demoralized Afghan troops to counter-attack the "infidels" by appealing to their pride in Islam and "their Afghan name."[11]

Bhaskar Pandit intended to withdraw from Bengal before the June rains set in. However, an influential officer of Alivardi's transferred his allegiance from Alivardi to Bhaskar after being captured at Burdwan and persuaded Bhaskar to remain in Bengal during the rainy season. This official was Mir Habib, a Persian merchant from Shiraz who had settled in Hughli and had been a partisan of Sarfaraz.[12] With Mir Habib as their "principal adviser,"[13] the Marathas stayed in Bengal through the summer of 1742. They made Katwa their capital and overran most of Bengal west of the Bhagirathi while Alivardi stayed to the east of the rain-swollen river.

In this first year, as well as in subsequent invasions, the Marathas terrorized western Bengal as no other invaders are known to have done. Their soldiers raided widely, collecting revenue from the zamindars, looting and destroying villages, and torturing people to force them to yield their valuable possessions. The poet Gangaram listed the names of over fifty villages and towns in west Bengal razed, burned, or plundered by Maratha bands. These included Midnapur, Chandrakona, Khirpai, Murshidabad, Burdwan, and Dainhat (the trading village near Katwa where the Burdwan rajas kept the shrines of their ancestors).[14] Gangaram, Ghulam Hussain Salim, and J.Z. Holwell each stated that the Marathas (Bargis) cut off the hands, ears, and noses of their captives, in addition to performing many other cruelties.[15]

A considerable migration took place, much of it crossing the Bhagirathi. Gangaram graphically described the plight of the refugees:[16]

> the Bargis began to plunder the villages, and all the people fled in terror. Brahman *pandits* fled, taking with them loads of manuscripts; goldsmiths fled with their scales and weights; and petty traders fled with their wares, and coppersmiths with their coppers and

[10] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, pp. 96–100, and Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, pp. 377ff.

[11] Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, p. 389.

[12] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, pp. 99–101.

[13] Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 70.

[14] [Gangaram], *The Maharashta Purana: An Eighteenth-Century Bengali Historical Text*, tr. Edward C. Dimock and Pratul Chandra Gupta (Honolulu, 1965), pp. 32–38.

[15] Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 73.

[16] [Gangaram], *Maharashta Purana*, pp. 26-32.

brasses, and blacksmiths and potters, taking with them their wheels and equipment; and fishermen of all kinds with their nets and lines, and conch merchants with their tools – all fled. The people fled in all directions; who could count their numbers? Kaestas, Baidyas[17] – all who lived in villages fled, when they heard the name of the Bargis. Ladies of good family, who had never before set foot on road fled from the Bargis with baskets on their heads. And land-owning Rajputs, who had gained their wealth by the sword, threw down their swords and fled. And Gosanis[18] and Mohantas[19] fled, riding on litters, their bearers carrying bag and baggage on their shoulders; and many farmers and Kaibartas[20] fled, their seed for next year's crops on the backs of the bullocks, and plows on their shoulders. And all the Sekhs and Saiyads and Mogals and Pathans[21] who were in the villages fled when they heard the name of the Bargis. And pregnant women, all but unable to walk, began their labor on the road and were delivered there. And all the *sikdars*[22] and village officials fled for their lives when they heard the name "Bargi."

There were some people who stood in the road and asked of all who passed where the Bargis were. Everyone replied: – I have not seen them with my own eyes. But seeing everyone flee, I flee also.

So the poor and wretched people fled, their bundles of coarse and ragged clothing on their heads. There were old people with staffs in their hands, and Canis and Dhanuks[23] leading their goats with ropes around their necks. From every village, big, or small, people fled in fear of the Bargis. People fled in four directions to various places. People of all thirty-six *varnas* fled, and there was no end to their numbers.

But then suddenly the Bargis swept down with a great shout and surrounded the people in the fields. They stole all their gold and silver, leaving all other things aside. They cut off the hands of some, and the noses and ears of others. Some they cut down with a single blow. They seized and dragged off the most beautiful of the women, who tried to flee, and tied ropes around their fingers and necks. When one had finished with a woman, another took her, while the raped women screamed for help. The Bargis did many foul and bestial things to the women, and then let them go.[24] Then, when they had plundered all they could in the fields, they entered the villages and set fire to large houses. *Bangala*,[25] *Chauari*,[26] *Visnu mandapas*[27] – they burned them all, large and small. They destroyed whole villages and swept, looting into all the four directions. They bound some

[17] I.e., Kayasthas, a Hindu caste cluster. Baidya also indicates a cluster of castes, most of which practiced medicine. (The notes to this passage are quoted from the translation by Dimock and Gupta.)
[18] I.e., *gosvami*, The term is usually used to designate a leader of the Vaishnava sect or a highly respected person of Vaisnava persuasion.
[19] I.e., mahant, the head of a math or monastery, also usually Vaisnava.
[20] The name of a caste, at the present time a caste of fishermen.
[21] These names indicate the ancestry of groups of Muslims in Bengal.
[22] Subordinate revenue collector.
[23] Names of tribal people.
[24] Unchastity, even when forced, could mean for a woman a life of misery.
[25] Bungalows.
[26] Thatch-roofed houses.
[27] Pavilions for worship or celebration.

people, their hands behind their backs, others they threw to the ground and while they were on their backs on the ground, kicked them with shoes.[28] They shouted over and over again, "Give us money!", and when they got no money they filled peoples' nostrils with water, and some they seized and drowned in tanks, and many died of suffocation. In this way they did all manner of foul and evil deeds. When they demanded money and it was not given to them, they would put the man to death. Those who had money gave it. Those who had none were killed.

Before the end of the rains in 1742, Alivardi crossed the Bhagirathi and began to pursue the Marathas. Bhaskar retreated to Nagpur in December 1742 only to return in February 1743 to collect more chauth. The third Maratha invasion began in March 1744. This time Alivardi lured the Marathas into negotiations and used the occasion to have his most important Afghan general, Mustafa Khan, assassinate Bhaskar and many of his officers. But in 1745, Alivardi was deserted by the ambitious Mustafa, who resented Alivardi's failure to fulfill his promise to appoint him governor of Bihar. Mustafa and his Afghan supporters turned on Alivardi and invited the Marathas under Raghuji Bhonsla to invade a fourth time, to avenge the murder of Bhaskar. Hereafter, Alivardi faced a combined Maratha – Afghan enemy. In the winter of 1745-46, bands of Marathas pillaged villages from Burdwan district south to Orissa. The sixth invasion was led by Raghuji's son, Janoji, whom Alivardi defeated near Burdwan town in 1747. In 1748, Alivardi began to gain the upper hand. He decisively defeated the Marathas and Afghans in Bihar in April 1748, he beat the Marathas near Midnapur in May 1749, and he routed Mir Habib in December 1750. Finally, in May 1751, Alivardi made peace with the Maratha government of Nagpur by surrendering the revenues of southern Orissa and by agreeing to an annual payment of Rs. 12 lakhs as chauth. Southwest Bengal continued to experience occasional raids by Maratha bands but the main invasions were finished.[29]

The final five years of Alivardi's reign were peaceful and he died in 1756. He had held Bengal together through the sixteen years of his reign by the force of his personality and his great courage and energy. But Alivardi's usurpation of power, the Maratha invasions, the Afghan insurrections, and the dissensions in his own family had sapped the foundations of the Bengal government. Alivardi, instead of recruiting Mughal, Rajput, and Khatri mansabdars as his seventeenth-century predecessors had, tried to rely upon Afghan commanders and troops, who were often recruited from Bihar. The Afghans proved to be a Trojan horse. Before his defection in 1745, Mustafa Khan had become so powerful, according to Yusuf Ali,

[28] One of the greatest indignities which can be visited upon a person in India.
[29] Datta, *Alivardi*, pp. 80–118.

> that Alivardi had not the power to issue any order on any affair of the realm without taking his advice, nor did he venture to make any change in the execution of anything, great or small, which he [Mustafa] proposed; therefore every zamindar of Bengal turned to him so that nothing but the name remained to the diwan for the revenue collection of the Khalsa [crownlands].[30]

Both in 1745 and 1748, major Afghan revolts threatened Alivardi. In 1748, Afghan rebels killed Haji Ahmad, Alivardi's brother, and Zain-ud-din, Alivardi's nephew, thereby eliminating two of his ablest relatives.[31]

These developments and the Maratha invasions, coupled with news of the Persian invasions of north India in 1738-39 and the start of the Afghan invasions in 1748, may have led some zamindars, merchants, and bankers to wonder about the future stability and viability of the Mughal regime in Bengal.[32] Yet a review of contemporary poetry by Edward Dimock and Pratul Chandra Gupta suggested that poets at least did not connect the Maratha invasions to a weakening of the nawab's government. Gangaram thought the Maratha invasions were brought on by the immorality of the age and people's failure to worship Radha and Krishna. Gangaram wrote that when the Earth could bear the general sin no longer, she approached Brahma, who requested Shiva to "strike down those evil people, and rid Earth of her burden." An apparent effort to appeal to the common religious identity of Bengali- and Marathi-speaking Hindus failed: Gangaram wrote that when a Maratha general performed sacrifices to the goddess Durga, "Durga ordered her followers to be gracious to the Muslim Nawab and oppose the Marathas, because the evil-minded ones had killed Brahmans and Vaisnavas."[33] The poet Ramprasad apparently did not mention the Maratha invasion.[34] Baneswar Vidyalankar's *Chitrachampu* ascribed Maratha military successes to "the wonderfully fast horses they ride." More interestingly, Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal* attributed the invasions to a specific communal cause: the destruction of temples at Bhubaneswar, Orissa, by Alivardi's Muslim soldiers. According to Bharatchandra, Shiva had caused Raghuji Bhonsla to dream about the incident and the dream so angered him that he ordered the Maratha invasion of Bengal. Somendra Chandra Nandy has speculated on the slim basis of Bharatchandra's apparent justification of the Maratha invasions that perhaps Bharatchandra's patron, Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia, had reached an "understanding" with the Marathas. Krishnachandra, who had been imprisoned by Alivardi, may have wanted the Marathas to punish

[30] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, pp. 110–11.
[31] Datta. *Alivardi*, pp. 133–34.
[32] Ibid., p. 118, and Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, p. 452.
[33] Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.2, p. 72.
[34] [Gangaram], *Maharashta Purana*, pp. xiii–xv and 52.

Alivardi for the temple desecration and might even have hoped to succeed Alivardi as ruler of Bengal.[35] On the other hand, the Persian chroniclers showed no interest in what Bengalis thought of the invasions although Sayyid Ghulam Husain Khan implied that character deficiencies, such as disloyalty, licentiousness, and profligacy, were the cause of the nizamat's decline, of which the Maratha incursions were one sign.[36]

Zamindars outside the invaded districts as well as in were affected by the Maratha raids. In west Bengal, zamindars could not collect from their ravaged villages and they could not borrow because the *shroffs* (money-changers) and other lenders had fled across the Bhagirathi river. Raja Chitrasen of Burdwan himself fled, perhaps to the protection of Calcutta. Baneswar Vidyalankar tried to make his patron's flight appear honorable:

> leaving the administration of the city of Burdwan to the Council of ministers, Maharaj Chitra Sen with a huge army of soldiers that could have easily covered the earth, after offering solace to the poor and the needy, and making arrangements for the protection of the Brahmins and the supplicants, left for the land between the two holy places of Tribeni and the Sagarsangam which is the new city by the name of Bishala.[37]

The annual Maratha invasions crippled Alivardi's tax collections in west Bengal. The Burdwan zamindari alone was Rs. 22 lakhs in arrears in 1742-43. In that year, Alivardi managed to collect only Rs. 64.52 lakhs or considerably less than half Bengal's land revenue. In subsequent years, the shortfall was even greater.[38] Alivardi tried to compensate by harassing other zamindars, including the rajas of Dinajpur, Nadia, and Nator.[39] In 1744, British merchants at Qasimbazar reported that around Murshidabad "every person who was reported to have money was seized and whipped until he disgorged his wealth." Fateh Chand of the Jagat Seth banking family told the British vakil "at present there is no government; they fear neither God nor the King but seem determined to force money from everybody."[40] With an acute shortage of cash, Alivardi was unable to pay his soldiers who often refused to fight. On one occasion, Mustafa Khan claimed his troops were owed Rs. 17 lakhs.[41] Alivardi frequently had to negotiate with his officers and make partial payments before they would march.

35 Somendra Chandra Nandy, "*Citra Campu* of Mahamahopadhyaya Banesvara Vidyalankara," *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 102, pt. 1, (Jan.–June 1983), p. 55.

36 Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, pp. 274–75, and vol. II, pp. 120–25, 241–42, 261ff, and 368–72.

37 Nandy, "Citra Campu", p. 58.

38 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 216.

39 Kalikinkar Datta, *Studies in the History of the Bengal Subah, 1740–70*, vol. I (Calcutta, 1936), p. 157.

40 J.H. Little, "The House of Jagatseth," *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 23, no. 43–44 (Jan.–June 1921), pp. 11-13.

41 Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 121.

Even when soldiers did fight for Alivardi, at times they were not far behind the Marathas in looting villages,[42] thereby hurting zamindari revenue collections.

A notable feature of the accounts of Alivardi's campaigns was the absence of references to zamindari military assistance. Zamindari troops had never played a central role in Mughal military affairs in Bengal but prior to the Maratha invasions they had assisted the nazims at important junctures. Zamindars had helped Murshid Quli put down the rebellion of Sitaram.[43] And when Alivardi marched from Bihar to overthrow Sarfaraz, zamindars joined Sarfaraz in resisting.[44] By the 1740s, zamindars had replaced mansabdars to a large degree in the revenue administration but they were not assigned corresponding military responsibilities. Possibly, Alivardi did not trust most zamindars. J.Z. Holwell claimed that at the time of the first Maratha invasion, the rajas of Bishnupur and Birbhum refused to resist the Maratha advance from Pachet towards Burdwan because they were angry at what they considered Alivardi's oppressive treatment.[45] James Grant wrote that the Birbhum raja's "treacherous connivance" helped the Marathas enter Bengal from the west.[46] The Persian chronicles of Yusuf Ali, Karam Ali, and Sayyid Ghulam Husain Khan are all but silent about the role of Bengal's zamindars in fighting the Marathas and the Afghans. There is one exception and that is the part played by Manikchandra, the diwan and military leader under Rajas Chitrasen and Tilakchandra of Burdwan. But the accounts of Manikchandra's military help to Alivardi were intended to show how unreliable he was.

Diwan Manikchandra was the key figure in Burdwan's relations with the nazims in the 1730s, 1740s, and 1750s. A non-Bengali Khatri, he seemed to have conducted Burdwan's revenue and military affairs for much of this period, as well as taking temporary assignments in the nazim's service. Manikchandra brought an auxiliary force from Burdwan to help Alivardi in Orissa in 1741, when Alivardi was attempting to subdue Rastam Jang, relative and supporter of the deposed Sarfaraz. On the eve of the decisive battle of Phulwari, Manikchandra, it was said, tried to cross over to Rastam Jang but his offer was rejected as suspicious and, as a result, Manikchandra "had to fight for Alivardi."[47] During his return from Orissa, Alivardi learned of the first Maratha invasion. Alivardi sent the paymaster of the Burdwan raja's troops, who was a Deccani Muslim, to negotiate with Bhaskar Pandit, the Maratha commander.[48] The

[42] Little, "The House of Jagatseth," p. 6.
[43] [Allah], *Narrative*, p. 92.
[44] Salim, *Riyazu*, pp. 311-12. At the same time, several zamindars of Bihar accompanied Alivardi who then rewarded them by taking them into government service. Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, p. 358.
[45] Cited by A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Bankura*, p. 86.
[46] James Grant "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 225.
[47] Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 45.
[48] Khan, *Seir*, vol. I, p. 382.

negotiations failed. When Alivardi elected to fight his way from Burdwan to Katwa, Manikchandra and his troops again accompanied him. This time also, Manikchandra was accused of lack of courage. Following a night-time barrage by Maratha guns 20 miles from Burdwan, Manikchandra and his men lost heart and "in the manner of a zamindar fled away."[49] Manikchandra nevertheless continued to be regarded as a useful officer. In 1750, while campaigning against the Marathas, Alivardi camped for some time in his garden at Burdwan. By 1756, Alivardi had persuaded him to leave Burdwan to serve at Murshidabad in an unknown capacity but possibly as a diwan.

Manikchandra's title of raja and incidents with the diwan of the Nadia zamindari and with Alivardi's son, Siraj-ud-daula, indicate that Manikchandra enjoyed high standing in the nazim's court. According to a legend, while Manikchandra was still diwan of Burdwan, he and Raghunandan, diwan of Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia, jostled each other while at the Murshidabad court and exchanged hostile words. After Manikchandra moved to Murshidabad to serve the nazim, he blamed Raghunandan for the theft of several lakhs of rupees en route to Murshidabad from Nadia. In consequence, Manikchandra ordered Raghunandan's execution, had him tied to the mouth of a cannon, and blew him away, in the contemporary form of Mughal and British punishments.[50] If true, the story is interesting on two counts. It suggests Manikchandra had considerable influence at court. It also raises the possibility that Manikchandra was taking revenge against Maharaja Krishnachandra for the publication of *Annadamangal* by his court poet, Bharatchandra. Bharatchandra had set the second episode, in which a raja's daughter is seduced by a stranger, in the court of the Burdwan rajas, thereby insulting the Burdwan raj family which had deprived Bharatchandra's family of its estate.[51] Whether or not that was the motive for Manikchandra's alleged execution of the Nadia diwan, it is widely believed that the Burdwan raj family resented Maharaja Krishnachandra's patronage of Bharatchandra's work.

Manikchandra was also one of the many nawabi officers who experienced the impetuosity of Siraj-ud-daula. Late in Alivardi's life, his son Siraj wished to demolish the portico of Manikchandra's Murshidabad house because it interfered with the view from Siraj's new palace. Alivardi prevented him, reportedly saying that "as you have many other palaces, it is proper that you should demolish the mansion that you have built before his house" so that Manikchandra's own view would be restored.[52] In his death-bed instructions to

[49] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 98.
[50] Kumud Nath Mallik, *Nadia Kahini* (Ranaghat, B.S. 1319), pp. 46–47.
[51] Dimock (tr.), *Thief of Love*, p. 20.
[52] Karim Ali, *Muzaffar-namah*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 59.

Siraj, Alivardi was heard to say "Monichund dewan, whose councils might have been your dangerous enemy, I have taken him to favour."[53] And Siraj did employ Manikchandra during his brief reign. He appointed Manikchandra governor of Calcutta after Siraj conquered it on 20 June 1756.

To conclude, apart from Manikchandra's Burdwan contingent, the Bengal zamindari armies are noticeable by their absence in the Persian accounts of this period. During the Maratha invasions, zamindars were more interested in protecting their families than organizing resistance. Ghulam Hussain Salim wrote that during the first Maratha invasion, Sis Rao, a Maratha officer, "persuaded the Zamindars to assess and collect the revenue," and that "the wealthy nobility and gentry, to save their family honour, quitted their houses and migrated across the Ganges."[54] The mother of the raja of Burdwan crossed the river and lived on land at Mulajor rented from the Nadia zamindari while the maharaja of Nadia moved his residence from Krishnagar to a safer site.[55]

The short-term effects of the Maratha invasions were devastating. The chief of the Dutch factory in Bengal estimated in 1755 that "close to 400,000 people were killed in Bengal and Bihar" during the Maratha invasions.[56] If we assume that Bengal's population was roughly 24 million at their start and that 350,000 of the deaths were in Bengal, that would mean that some fourteen out of every thousand people perished.[57] One way of measuring the economic impact is looking at East India Company imports to Britain from Bengal (in the absence of figures for the total exports from Bengal). Imports from Bengal averaged £462,854 from 1738 to 1742 and £355,633 from 1752 to 1756. In other words, imports from Bengal averaged 23 percent less in the five years after the invasions than in the five years preceding them. The price of ordinary rice in Bengal rose sharply in 1743 to levels far above (sometimes double) prices recorded in the previous thirty years, fell back to usual levels in the 1748-50 period, and then rose again.[58] Such price increases presumably benefited rice producers but they suggest a shortage of rice and they must have posed hardships for the landless and non-agricultural population. There seems reason to accept K.N. Chaudhuri's judgments that "the Maratha invasions and Alivardi's press-

[53] J.Z. Holwell to COD, 30 Nov. 1756, Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. II, p. 16.

[54] Salim, *Riyazu*, p. 343.

[55] Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 74.

[56] Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, p. 253.

[57] For reasons for guessing that Bengal's population might have been 24 million in 1742, see Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, pp. 246–47.

[58] Histogram of the price of rice in Bengal, 1712–60, Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, p. 101. Chaudhuri points out that there was a long-term upward trend in the prices of Bengal textiles, raw silk, and other products which could have been partially the result of increased money supply resulting from increased bullion imports (pp. 100–08).

ing financial needs began to push the economy of Bengal towards the brink of a general collapse."[59]

The long-term effects of the Maratha invasions were probably more political than economic although careful statistical analysis has not been done. Despite high mortality, the migration of weavers and others to eastern Bengal, and the interruption of revenue collections and trade, both the revenue collections and European trade soon returned to pre-1742 levels and resumed their climb.[60] When Alivardi died in 1756, he left no relative to succeed in whom zamindars, bankers, most nawabi officers, or opportunistic Europeans had confidence. Many signs pointed to the possibility of a change in regime: Alivardi's own usurpation, dissensions in Alivardi's family, the Maratha invasions, and the chaotic, violent competition for power in upper India. British merchants were the catalyst for change. Advocates of trade without state interference, they paradoxically hungered for and sensed the possibility of despotically controlled commerce.

[59] Ibid., p. 308. Conversely, Sinha's (*Economic History*, vol. I, p. 10) statement that "this talk of the economic decline of Bengal before Plassey is a myth" seems to be based less on evidence than patriotism.

[60] Tapan Raychaudhuri (Kumar and Desai (eds.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II, p. 7) believes that "despite the Maratha raids and Alivardi's extortions, the real decline in Bengal's economy was largely a post-Plassey and even post-1813 phenomenon."

9 Zamindars and the transition to Company rule

C.A. Bayly has argued that "British conquest often meant no more than the slow drift to the East India Company of soldiers, merchants and administrators, leaving the Indian rulers with nothing more than a husk of royal grandeur."[1] In Bengal after Alivardi's death in 1756, the drift was relatively rapid and massive even though tinged with ambivalent feelings. Certain bankers, merchants, soldiers, and administrators led the way, and the zamindars, with no real options available, fell in line after several years of hesitation and flirtation with resistance.[2]

A deceptive calm had returned to Bengal during the five years between the final Maratha invasion in 1751 and Alivardi's death. In the year of the last Maratha incursion, after almost a decade of major arrears, Alivardi had felt confident enough of his hold on Bengal to add abwabs of Rs. 22.2 lakhs to Bengal's annual revenue demand, bringing the total to Rs. 186.4 lakhs.[3] This was the first in a series of revenue increases that came in rapid succession in the 1750s and 1760s. His diwan, Raja Kiratchandra, had succeeded in collecting a huge sum from Burdwan on account of unpaid balances.[4] The Burdwan raja was Tilakchandra[5] who at the age of fifteen had succeeded his uncle Raja Chitrasen upon his death in 1744. Burdwan raj affairs were dominated in Tilakchandra's youth by its diwan, Raja Manikchandra, who seems to have had closer relations with Alivardi's court than any other zamindari officer in Bengal, perhaps because of partial success in discharging arrears that had accumulated during the Maratha invasions.

The brief interlude of peace ended following Alivardi's death in 1756. The rapid evolution of the East India Company from trader to king-maker to the

[1] Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, p. 6.

[2] For an excellent overview of the transition period, see Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.2, pp. 70ff.

[3] James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 221.

[4] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 152, wrote that "Raja Kirat Chand, during his diwani took more than a kror of rupees over and above the fixed revenue from the *chakla* of Bardwan and put it in the public treasury, which greatly pleased Alivardi." Such a sum would have equaled over half Bengal's annual jama and thus is not plausible.

[5] Temple inscriptions spelled his name in various ways, including Trailokyachandra.

governing power in Bengal in the years 1756 to 1765 surprised everyone concerned. When Alivardi died, the divisions within his family and the weak, unpredictable character of his successor Siraj-ud-daula were evident but the Company had no plans to intervene in nawabi affairs nor did many Bengalis anticipate what followed. From Siraj's seizure of Fort William in June 1756, through the battle of Plassey and the Company's conspiracy with and installation of Mir Jafar in June 1757, through the Company's decisions to install Mir Qasim as nazim in 1760 and then to bring back Mir Jafar in 1763, events moved so rapidly and their consequences were so sweeping that they outstripped the capacity of all parties to foresee the final results: the eclipse of nawabi power and domination by the Company.

As Company influence expanded, Company servants discovered undreamed of opportunities to make money from both trade and revenue administration. They and their Indian partners set up monopolies in the trade of salt and other commodities, they exempted themselves from the payment of duty on both Company and private trade, they sold their political influence to nawabi officials and zamindars, they gave themselves and their dependents the most valuable revenue-collecting rights. In the fluid, confused period in which the Murshidabad nawabs held formal authority while the Company exercised real power, behaviors degenerated into a scramble for private gain. Bengal was now a political bazar, with military power and administrative authority for sale.

The agrarian population was asked to pay more revenue than ever before as military costs and the price of obtaining political influence escalated. In both the lands retained by the nawabs of Murshidabad and those transferred to Company management, the revenue demands rose at an unprecedented rate. Between 1756 and 1763, the demand on Bengal lands increased by 40 percent.[6] Under Company control, the gross rental demand of the Burdwan zamindari went from Rs. 33.3 lakhs in 1760-61 to Rs. 43.5 lakhs in 1768-69. The simultaneous growth of revenue demands in Company and nawabi territory complicated Bengali political responses to the Company's ascendancy. For most Bengalis there was enthusiasm for neither the Company nor the Murshidabad government.

Remarkably little has been written about zamindari attitudes and reactions to these transformations. Zamindars were as unprepared as other groups for the successive "revolutions." Although Alivardi and his officers had treated some zamindars harshly during the Maratha invasions, those invasions had cast Alivardi in the role of Bengal's defender. In the final five years of Alivardi's life, pressure on most zamindars was lightened as agriculture, artisan manufactures, and trade recovered. Alivardi lacked neither ability, vigor, nor

[6] Ascoli, *Early Revenue History*, p. 28.

statesmanship. On the eve of Alivardi's death in 1756, there were few signs that Bengalis anticipated an end to rule by non-Bengali Muslims, a rule that had lasted over five centuries. Yet signs of a changed political climate were accumulating. Possibly Alivardi's usurpation and the collapse of the Mughal imperium left the Murshidabad government with less legitimacy in the eyes of zamindars than it had previously enjoyed. Reports of British and French military intervention in succession disputes in south India raised anxiety among at least Murshidabad officers. Within Bengal, the center of economic gravity had been shifting to the European enclaves along the Hughli river where Indian merchants seemed to have experienced more security than in nawabi territory.

Had Hindus come to resent Muslim or non-Bengali domination? We have seen that Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal*, completed in 1752 or 1753, suggested that the Maratha invasions had been a Hindu crusade to punish the Yavannas (Muslims) for damaging temples at Bhubaneshwar in Orissa in Alivardi's reign.[7] Earlier events in Orissa may have offended Bengali Hindus even more. In the late 1720s, Taqi Khan, Nazim Shuju-ud-din's son and governor of Orissa, had "forcibly converted" the raja of Khurda to Islam. The raja was the custodian of the Jagannath temple in Puri which was of particular sanctity to Bengali Hindus. Thousands of Bengalis went on pilgrimage to Puri each year and a number of zamindars, including the rajas of Burdwan, traced their arrival in Bengal to an ancestor's pilgrimage to Puri. Because a Muslim now held the Jagannath temple, devotees removed the Jagannath image from the temple to preserve it from desecration and in consequence the stream of pilgrims dried up, until 1734 when a new Muslim governor permitted the image's restoration and worship at Puri.[8]

Evidence that many Hindus in Bengal questioned their ability to fulfill their cultural ideals is lacking. Zamindars alienated land to Brahmins, built temples, and celebrated pujas without recorded interference from the Murshidabad nazims after Murshid Quli Khan. For example, at Kalna the mother of Raja Tilakchandra of Burdwan built a Krishna temple in 1752; his aunt, Changakumari (the widow of Raja Chitrasen), installed a Shiva-linga in the Jagannath temple in 1754; and Kirtichandra's mother built a Shiva temple in 1755.[9] Hindu zamindars, revenue officials, and bankers received at least as much favor and patronage under Murshid Quli Khan, Shuja-ud-din, and Alivardi as their Muslim counterparts. The periods of imprisonment suffered by zamindars

[7] Datta, *Alivardi*, p. 57. I am indebted to Aditi Nath Sarkar for the suggestion that the *Annadamangal* may express Hindu doubts about their ability to fulfill their religious obligations under nawabi rule.

[8] Prabhat Mukherjee, *History of the Jagannath Temple in the 19th Century* (Calcutta, 1977), pp. 14–15.

[9] Government of West Bengal, *WBDG: Barddhaman*, p. 93–94.

defaulting on revenue demands interfered with their devotional and purification rites. But that does not seem to have led them to aspire to new forms of government. More likely, the autonomy of the large zamindars, the broad influence of Hindu administrators and bankers at Murshidabad, the limited religious syncretism of some domiciled Muslim officials, and the absence of clear alternatives still left zamindars reconciled to the continuation of nawabi rule, despite the news of momentous changes in other parts of India. The behavior of zamindars as the "revolutions" of 1757, 1760, 1763, and 1765 unfolded suggests that zamindars had no shared expectation that the system of government would change or even that zamindars would play a major role in changing the personnel of government. But individual zamindars supported new personnel, joining the Company or invaders from northern India as opportunities presented themselves. It was a time of confusion and opportunism, not constancy or principled action. The zamindars' strategy consisted of backing the least unattractive alternative without committing themselves earlier than necessary. In practice, this meant sending messages of support to various parties and then waiting to see who was likely to win.

Siraj-ud-daula, Alivardi's grandson and successor, was only about twenty when Alivardi died in 1756, and his arrogance, peremptoriness, and profligacy had already alienated many influential members of his court. In 1818, William Ward quoted a descendant of Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia as saying that Siraj's seizure of pretty women and sinking of passenger boats had filled the country "with terror" and led the rajas of Birbhum, Bishnupur, Dinajpur, Midnapur, and Nadia to submit a petition to "the prime minister." Siraj's rash decision to drive the English East India Company from Bengal in June 1756 made the Company natural allies of the many enemies Siraj had created in his own court and in the districts. The Nadia descendant also seems to be the principal source for the story that Maharaja Krishnachandra approached the British chief at Calcutta with a plan to overthrow Siraj.[10] That S.C. Hill did not mention the story when he published voluminous records concerning 1756-57 raises doubts about its authenticity, especially in view of Hill's efforts to show that Siraj's deposition was largely an effort by Hindu bankers and officers to free themselves from Muslim rule. Two documents published by Hill did show that the British knew Krishnachandra would be sympathetic to their plots and give refuge to Company servants escaping from Qasimbazar. In one, Roger Drake informed Robert Clive that Krishnachandra "has been long discontented and used ill by the Nabob" and he confirmed reports that the nawab's officers were discontented.[11]

[10] Ward, *View*, vol. I, p. 28.

[11] Roger Drake to Colonel Clive, 3 May 1757, and William Watts to Colonel Clive, 4 June 1757, Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. II, pp. 375.

Discontent was one matter; conspiracy was quite another. The memory of Pratapaditya and Sitaram were no doubt reminders that dispossession and death awaited disloyal zamindars. Moreover, nawabi rule prior to Siraj's brief reign had represented stability and predictability far more than their opposites. And in a polity in which the form and substance of social control were based on personal ties of servants to masters, loyalty was a virtue in its own right and a virtue that could not ordinarily be set aside because a current office-holder lacked character. Zamindari betrayal of the ruler in eighteenth-century Bengal was both uncommon and dangerous. Each of the major collaborators in the Company-sponsored revolutions may have been torn between the obligations of fidelity and the desire for a new nazim. In 1757, Jagat Seth, a few days after the Company forces recaptured Calcutta and demolished the town of Hughli, expressed mixed sentiments of prudence and principle that must have been common among those disaffected from Siraj. He replied to Robert Clive's request for his mediation:

> You are pleased to say that the Nabob listens to what I recommend, and hope I will exert myself for your good and the general benefit of the country. My business is that of a merchant, and probably what I may recommend that way he may give ear to. You have acted the very reverse part, and possessed yourselves of Calcutta by force, after which you have taken and destroyed the city of Hughley, and by all appearances you seem to have no design but that of fighting. In what manner then can I introduce an application for accommodating matters between the Nabob and you? What your intentions are it is impossible to find out by these acts of hostility. Put a stop to this conduct and let me know what your demands are. You may then depend upon it I will use my interest with the Nabob to finish these troubles. How can you expect that the Nabob will pass by or overlook your conduct in pretending to take up arms against the Prince or *Subah* of the country. Weigh this within yourself.[12]

By April 1757, Jagat Seth, whom Siraj had threatened with circumcision, was participating in the plot against Siraj and suggesting to Clive his own candidate for the succession.[13]

It is unclear if Raja Tilakchandra of Burdwan was among those who sought the overthrow of Siraj. Tilakchandra had been zamindar of Burdwan for a dozen years when Alivardi Khan died in 1756 and was now twenty-seven years old. The Maratha invasions had ended five years earlier and, judging from British comments on Burdwan's prosperity in the late 1750s, Burdwan's economy was once again one of the most prosperous in the province. Tilakchandra seemed well positioned to assess the relative strengths and character of both the nawabs and the English East India Company. The East India Company had numerous *aurangs* or weaving centers within the Burdwan zamindari and, although the

[12] Jagat Seth to Colonel Clive, 14 Jan. 1757, ibid., vol. II, p. 104.
[13] Ibid., vol. II, p. 343; also Khan, *Seir*, vol. II, p. 225.

Company's trade was exempt from zamindari duties, the raja had officers stationed in dozens of scattered *chaukis* (customs' stations) for collecting duties on non-Company trade and their officers were no doubt a source of information about the behavior of the British merchants and their agents. Their behavior became remarkably coercive and monopolistic only after the removal of Siraj-ud-daula in 1757 and there seems to be no way of determining what Tilakchandra thought of them before this time.

Tilakchandra's best intelligence about the Company probably came from Calcutta itself where he had a house and some financial dealings. Fellow Punjabi Khatris may have been his main associates in Calcutta. Most important, he was closely connected to the Sikh Khatri Omichand, Calcutta's wealthiest Indian merchant and a key partner of the Company in the plot to oust Siraj-ud-daula in 1757. Sometime before Alivardi's death, Omichand had introduced Tilakchandra, among other prominent individuals, to the Company's chief engineer, Colonel C.F. Scott. Scott afterward observed that "in Bengal the Jentue [Hindu] rajahs and inhabitants were very much disaffected to the Moor Government, and secretly wished for a change and opportunity of throwing off the tyrannical yoke." Scott thought they would be willing to join the Europeans in overturning the government.[14] If Tilakchandra was among those hoping for a new government, events in 1756 and 1757 may have soured his view of the British. In 1756, Tilakchandra became embroiled in Calcutta in a dispute over a debt to one Mr. Wood. Wood filed a complaint in the Company's court against Tilakchandra seeking repayment of Rs. 7,000. When both the raja and his gomashta, Pranjeeboom Coberage, refused to appear, arguing that the raja neither owed the money nor was subject to Company courts, the sheriff of Calcutta seized the raja's Calcutta house containing "a quantity of money, jewels, and goods, and also a great many bonds and papers, some for very considerable sums, both from Europeans as well as blacks." Tilakchandra immediately complained to the nawab in Murshidabad and tried to halt the Company's trade within his zamindari. Alivardi's death prevented Tilakchandra from obtaining help. According to a Company servant, this was fortunate for the Company because otherwise Alivardi would have stopped "our business at the aurrungs [places of manufacture]." Nevertheless, the seizure of the raja's house "helped to inflame the natives against us, as well as to add one, to many other [complaints] made to the Nabob against the English."[15] There is no report of how this affair affected Tilakchandra's attitude towards the Company's ascendancy.[16] Nor is it recorded

[14] Extracts of letter from Charles F. Noble to Select Com., Fort St. George, 22 Sept. 1756, Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. III, pp. 326–28.

[15] William Tooke's Account, ibid., vol. I, pp. 280-81.

[16] Tilakchandra disobeyed Siraj's order to join him in the attack on Fort William in 1756. Ibid., p. 136.

how Tilakchandra reacted in 1757 to the Company's duping Omichand into signing a fake agreement promising him rewards for his part in deposing Siraj-ud-daula. According to Robert Orme, the humiliation and disappointment caused by the deception unbalanced Omichand[17] and he died in December 1758. His brother-in-law and successor to his fortune, Hazari Mal, served as one of the Burdwan Raj's bankers in the following decades. The Company's seizure of Tilakchandra's house and its betrayal of Omichand must have left the raja at least wary of the Europeans.

Tilakchandra probably also learned about both the dissensions in Murshidabad and the character of the British from another close associate, his ex-diwan, Manikchandra. Manikchandra was appointed faujdar of Hughli and he commanded troops under Siraj-ud-daula in the seige of Fort William in June 1756.[18] After the capture of Calcutta, Siraj appointed Manikchandra as Governor of Calcutta, with the responsibility of defending Fort William and the lower Hughli river from any Company attempt to return. He was governor during the "Black Hole" incident.[19] Simultaneously, he was described as the farmer of estates along the Hughli river, mostly to the south of Calcutta.[20] Presumably, he held these lands under the raja of Burdwan.[21]

During the year between Siraj's seizure of Calcutta and Siraj's loss at Plassey, Manikchandra corresponded with various Company officers and tried to convey the impression he was the Company's ally. After Clive arrived at Fulta from Madras on 15 December 1756 to prepare for the reconquest of Calcutta, Clive and Manikchandra exchanged friendly letters, in which Manikchandra wrote of "my desire of serving the Company which I shall continue to do to the utmost of my power."[22] Manikchandra made few preparations to defend the forts at Fort William, Tanna, and Budge-Budge, and Clive overran them with ease in late December.[23] In April 1757, Luke Scrafton reported that Manikchandra had joined the conspiracy against Siraj.[24] Manikchandra commanded one of Siraj's

[17] Cited in introduction, ibid., p. clxxxix. Sinha, on the other hand, wrote that while Omichand turned towards religion, there is no evidence that he became insane. *Economic History*, vol. I, p. 244.

[18] Stewart, *History*, p. 572.

[19] Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. III, p. 142.

[20] Ibid., vol. I, p. cii.

[21] Holwell wrote that the Burdwan raj had lands paying Rs. 4 lakhs annually, "contiguous to the bounds of Calcutta," a palace in Behala, and a fort at Budge-Budge. *Interesting Historical Events*, pp. 195–96. By 1760, pargana Behala had been transferred to the Company. *Fifth Report, 1812*, Firminger's Introduction, vol. I, p. cxxv.

[22] Ram Gopal, *How the British Occupied Bengal: A Corrected Account of the 1756–65 Events* (Bombay, 1963), p. 115.

[23] Gopal, ibid., pp. 121–22, attributed Manikchandra's failure to defend the forts with vigor to collaboration with the Company; Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. I, pp. cii and cxxxvii, suggested it may have been fear of, rather than support for, the British.

[24] Cited by Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, vol. II, p. 343.

major forces at the battle of Plassey in June, was wounded, and was one of "the first to retreat."[25] After Plassey, Company officials treated him cordially although they seemed unsure whether he had been committed to their cause.

During the Company's return to Bengal, Clive sensed the importance of conciliating or reassuring major zamindars. Three days before Plassey, Clive wrote Raja Asad-ul-Zaman Khan of Birbhum, who had expressed his hostility to Siraj-ud-daula and his friendship for the Company, inviting him to join Clive's forces against Siraj.[26] In October 1757, the Birbhum raja informed Clive that "My country is yours you may build Houses or whatever you please in it." In November, when French troops were in Birbhum, he offered to "send their heads" if Clive ordered it.[27] Clive also approached Raja Tilakchandra of Burdwan by having Omichand ask the raja to write him. Immediately after Clive's victory at Plassey, Tilakchandra wrote Colonel Clive a letter clearly designed to communicate support for the Company's new role. He told Clive that because of the nazims' "rapaciousness ... nothing is left to me. These three years I have no power left me in my Country, and my own Servants refuse to obey me. But by the Blessing of God by your coming the Country shall flourish, and all Men have their Hearts at Ease." Tilakchandra informed Clive that Manikchandra was again "the Governor of the Country" and that Omichand would give Clive further information.[28]

Whatever Tilakchandra really thought about nawabi rule, in 1758 his zamindari was transferred temporarily to the Company. This was because the new nawab, Mir Jafar, found himself in financial distress soon after Plassey. As the price for Company support, he had pledged to pay the Company and its officers over Rs. 200 lakhs as gifts and as compensation for the losses sustained in Siraj-ud-daula's capture of Calcutta. In addition, he had agreed to pay compensation of Rs. 47 lakhs to Omichand and various Armenians and Hindus for their losses. Yet when his supporters had opened Siraj's treasury, they had discovered only Rs. 140 lakhs instead of the Rs. 5,000 lakhs they had anticipated.[29] Mir Jafar was also in political trouble. He faced problems in Midnapur and Purnia; he suspected that Ramnarayan, his deputy governor in Bihar, and Rai Durlabh, the influential ex-diwan at Murshidabad, were plotting against him; and he was threatened by possible invasion by the nawab of Awadh. Yet his treasury was empty and his army's pay was in arrears. He turned to Clive for military help in subduing Ramnarayan at Patna and blocking the anticipated invasion from Awadh.

[25] Ibid., pp. 426–27. Manikchandra also had a bullet pierce his turban at Budge-Budge while he sat conspicuously on his elephant. Stewart, *History*, p. 385.
[26] *Ft Wm-IHC*, vol. II, *1757–59* (Delhi, 1957), p. xxvi.
[27] Iris MacFarlane, *The Black Hole: Or the Makings of a Legend* (London, 1975), p. 270.
[28] Raja Tilakchandra to Col. Clive, received 27 June 1757, no. 186, Home Misc., vol. 193.
[29] Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756–57*, pp. cxci-ii and ccx.

Clive used Mir Jafar's discomfort to extract further concessions. He agreed to send troops to Bihar in support of the nawab only on condition that Mir Jafar give the Company *tankhwas* (assignments) of the revenues of Burdwan, Hughli, and Nadia for two years for the discharge of his debts to the British and for the employment of the Company's troops in Bihar. Accordingly, Mir Jafar issued orders to people in those areas to pay their revenues to the Company instead of to his own treasury.[30] Burdwan zamindari officials traveled to Murshidabad and settled a *kistbandi* (payment schedule) with Warren Hastings, the Company's Resident. At first, the rajas of Burdwan and Nadia and the faujdar of Hughli paid their revenues to Hastings. Then in August 1758, the Company appointed Nandakumar, an experienced nawabi revenue official who had recently been officiating faujdar of Hughli and was now Clive's *munshi* (Persian teacher or secretary), as *tahsildar* (collector) of the "mortgaged areas." The Calcutta Council gave Nandakumar a khilat and he began to collect the revenues from his headquarters at Hughli.[31] Thus one of the Company's first acts after obtaining Burdwan was to appoint an outsider to oversee the zamindari collections. In August, the Calcutta Council reported "the country enjoys a profound tranquillity ... and we are allowed to collect the revenues of Burdwan, Nuddea and other places without any intervention of the Government's officers."[32] Four months later, the Council found that "most" of the revenue was being paid.[33] But in 1759 and 1760 balances accumulated in both Burdwan and Nadia. The nawab, who was eager to discharge his debts so he could recover these valuable lands, complained about Nandakumar's performance.[34] In early 1760, the Company dismissed Nandakumar and sent two of its covenanted servants to Burdwan and Nadia to press the rajas for prompt payment.[35]

Nandakumar's suspected peculation,[36] Raja Tilakchandra's resentment at the curtailment of his authority over the collections, and the lingering impact of the Maratha invasions may all have contributed to the Burdwan arrears. The zamindari officials in the assigned lands and the nawab's officials at Murshidabad resented the growing power of the Company. Acting Governor Holwell wrote in July 1760 that as a result of the assignments of revenue to the Company, the rairayan, mutasaddis, diwans, "and every Herpey employed in Zemindarree

[30] Letter to Court, 23 Jan. 1758, *Ft Wm-IHC*, vol. II, *1757–1759*, p. 307.

[31] Benoy Krishna Roy, *The Career and Achievements of Maharaja Nanda Kumar, Dewan of Bengal (1705–1775)* (Calcutta, 1969), pp. 24–27.

[32] Letter to Court, 26 Aug. 1758, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. II, *1757–59*, p. 320.

[33] Letter to Court, 31 Dec. 1758, ibid., p. 343.

[34] Abdul Majed Khan, *The Transition in Bengal, 1756–1775: A Study of Saiyid Muhammad Reza Khan* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 28.

[35] Ibid., p. 28.

[36] Percival Spear, *Master of Bengal: Clive and his India*, (London, 1975), p. 114.

and revenues, became our implacable enemies."[37] The English refusal to pay duty on their internal trade and their coercive purchases and sales of goods fueled the apprehensions about their ascendancy, as did their displacement of the zamindars in their newly acquired Twenty-four Parganas.[38]

In the Burdwan zamindari, though, a major additional source of revenue deficiency in 1760 was the incursion of outside military forces in connection with the invasion of the *shahzada* (Mughal prince) from Bihar. The largest military cloud hanging over west Bengal in Mir Jafar's first reign was the presence in Bihar of Ali Gauhar, Emperor Alamgir's eldest son. Shahzada Ali Gauhar had escaped from Delhi when Ahmad Abdali sacked the Mughal capital in 1757 and had moved eastward through Awadh to Bihar. Encouraged by Nawab Shuja-ud-daula of Awadh, Ali Gauhar hoped to invade Bengal which had ceased making payments to the imperial treasury.[39] In early 1760, Ali Gauhar entered western Bengal with the help of Kangar Khan, uncle of the raja of Birbhum, and proceeded by the southern route through Deoghar to Bishnupur. His presence seemed to raise the hopes of zamindars in west Bengal of throwing off the control of both Nawab Mir Jafar and the East India Company. Ali Gauhar's father had been assassinated and the prince now had a good chance of becoming emperor: he was in fact proclaimed Emperor Shah Alam II in 1761.

The three most powerful Bengal zamindars west of the Hughli, the rajas of Birbhum, Bishnupur, and Burdwan, agreed to support Ali Gauhar, who was also joined at Bishnupur by a Maratha army of 5-6,000 horse under Shivaram Bhat Sathe, the Maratha governor of Orissa.[40] Henry Vansittart wrote in late 1760 that the rajas of Bishnupur, Ramghar, "and the other countries, bordering upon the mountains, were ready to shake off their dependence, and had offered considerable supplies" to the Birbhum raja who was planning to attack Murshidabad.[41] Had those rajas and the Marathas acted in concert and committed their armies to help Ali Gauhar, they might have seriously tested the military strength of Nawab Mir Jafar and the East India Company, which was being paid to protect the nawab. However, the Marathas and the western zamindars did not give the shahzada significant support. Ali Gauhar marched towards Murshidabad from Bishnupur and was confronted by the combined forces of the nawab and the Company near Mangalkot, 20 miles north of Burdwan town, on 4 April 1760. After a skirmish, Ali Gauhar retreated from Bengal and the threat to the Company and its "sponsored state" temporarily receded.[42] But the Marathas remained to plunder.

37 President Holwell's Memorial to the Select Com., Vansittart, *Narrative*, p. 19.
38 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 24.
39 Dodwell (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, vol. V, pp. 437–44.
40 Kalikinkar Datta, *Shah Alam II and the East India Company*, (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 8–11.
41 Vansittart, *Narrative*, p. 69.
42 Datta, *Shah Alam II*, p. 12.

Disturbances in west Bengal continued after the shahzada's withdrawal. His return was expected. Disaffected relatives of Mir Jafar and zamindars in Bihar and the hills of western Bengal offered him their support. Mir Jafar was failing to make his authority effective in the nawabi territories. His desperation was shown in the assassinations of his enemies, including five relatives of ex-Nawab Alivardi Khan and "about seventy women of inferior note" at Dacca in June 1760.[43] Mir Jafar's prospects declined further when lightning killed his son, Miran, on 2 July. Immediately after, the nawab's troops, angry at the arrears in their pay, surrounded the nawab's palace at Murshidabad, dragged his officers from their palanquins, climbed the palace walls and threw masonry down on the palace employees, and threatened to kill the nawab. "The scene lasted two days and seemed to portend the certain destruction of the Nabob," wrote the Company's Resident, Warren Hastings. At this point, Mir Qasim, the nawab's son-in-law, came forward with Rs. 3,00,000 from his personal treasury for the soldiers' pay and the crisis passed.[44]

The chaos at Murshidabad encouraged Mir Jafar's enemies and kept alive the belief that further political changes were likely. The raja of Birbhum continued his preparations to rebel.[45] In July, 1760, Hugh Watts reported from Burdwan that Raja Tilakchandra was confining his ijaradars (revenue farmers) and was trying to seize revenue payments as they were carried to the kachari, apparently to prevent the Company from receiving them. The raja's soldiers were misbehaving. Some halted the palanquin of Gokhal Majumdar, one of the raja's chief revenue officers, and threatened to confine him. In addition, one Sukh Lal, "a Jammadar & Userer," killed a Company sepoy. When Hugh Watts tried to arrest Sukh Lal, 7-800 of the raja's soldiers opened fire on 200 Company sepoys, killing 44 men and wounding 57, including their English officer.[46]

Several factor led Raja Tilakchandra and his army to resist Company efforts to enforce revenue collections in the summer of 1760. First, the passage of Ali Gauhar's army through the heart of the zamindari was disruptive and led the raja to protest the Company's demand. Second, as the Burdwan collections fell off, the Company, which was pressed for money, grew harsher in its revenue collection. The Burdwan zamindar was accustomed to collecting his revenues without interference from outside. The presence of Company officials infringed upon the privileges of the raja and his officers. Third, the raja complained that Telinga sepoys who had been employed by the Dutch at Chinsura and Fulta prior to their defeat by the British had entered his eastern parganas and had

43 Vansittart, *Narrative*, pp. 67–68.
44 W. Hastings to Select Com., 18 July 1769, ibid., pp. 30–31.
45 Ibid.
46 Hugh Watts to J.Z. Holwell, 11 July 1760, Bengal Public Consult., 14 July 1760, Range 1, vol. 32, p. 341.

plundered villages, causing many persons to flee and producing a revenue loss of Rs. 2.3 lakhs.[47] Tilakchandra claimed he was entitled to deductions for the incursions of Ali Gauhar, the Telingas, and the Marathas. He was especially distressed by the Marathas whose presence would have interfered with the planting of the aman or winter rice crop. He wrote in August 1760 "How can I relate to you the present deplorable situation of this place. Three months the Mahrattas remained here burning, plundering and laying waste the whole country, but now, thank God, they are all gone, but the inhabitants are not yet returned. The inhabitants have lost almost all they were worth."[48] Finally, it was evident that Raja Tilakchandra was unable to control his troops, that in part the resistance to the Company and the efforts to seize the treasure were carried out independently of the raja. After the raja's troops fired upon the Company's sepoys in July 1760, Hugh Watts wrote from Burdwan that the "enemy" there had increased to 5,000 soldiers and that they were again planning to seize the revenue. These men, he explained, "are the Rajah's unpaid discontented forces with other malcontents that harass the inhabitants and disturb the peace of this province."[49] Two days later, Watts requested Governor Holwell not to send troops to Burdwan. "My Party and myself will be immediately sacrificed and very likely the Rajah" also.[50] The implication is clear. Watts had concluded that although Raja Tilakchandra was dissatisfied with the revenue demands, he was not responsible for the attack upon the Company's troops. The troops were agitated by the arrears in their pay. In the summer of 1760, when the raja's collections were disrupted by the incursions of the shahzada, the Telingas, and the Marathas, the raja had tried to keep up his payments to government by holding back his troops' pay. In 1761, the raja owed his troops Rs. 4.5 lakhs, equal to over a year's salary.[51] It was not surprising they were disruptive.

The assignment of the Burdwan, Hughli, and Nadia revenues to the East India Company had expired in March 1760. Nawab Mir Jafar "instantly demanded the restoration of the lands." As the nawab still owed the Company large sums and the Company's military expenditures far exceeded its revenues, the Company refused. Instead, it decided to demand the permanent transfer of Burdwan and other territories. The Council of Calcutta reasoned that in peaceful times, Burdwan produced a large revenue and "lies contiguous to Calcutta."[52] In September 1760, when they negotiated terms for installing Mir Qasim in place of Mir Jafar, the Council made the cession of Burdwan,

47 Long (ed.), *Selections*, p. 317.
48 Ibid., p. 313.
49 Hugh Watts to J.Z. Holwell, 11 July 1760.
50 Watts to Holwell, 13 July 1760, Bengal Public Consult., 14 July 1760, Range 1, vol. 32, p. 346.
51 Letter to Court, 12 Nov. 1761, *Ft Wm-IHC*, vol. III, *1760–1763* (Delhi, 1968), p. 369.
52 Letter to Court, 16 Jan. 1761, ibid., pp. 289–92.

Midnapur, and Chittagong a central condition. Burdwan was now officially British territory.

Raja Tilakchandra immediately showed his displeasure with the cession of Burdwan by recruiting new troops. Some 15,000 "peons, pikes, and robbers" had been enlisted "and others are daily entering."[53] This time there was no suggestion that the mobilization lacked the raja's support. The Company's government also suspected he was corresponding "with the other disaffected Rajahs."[54]

Why was Tilakchandra preparing to resist the grant of Burdwan to the Company? He knew from the experience of over two years with the Company agents supervising Burdwan's collections that the Company was prepared to interfere in his administration as the nazims prior to Siraj-ud-daula had not. Moreover, he had heard reports that the Company intended to take his zamindari from him.[55] And he was disturbed by the Company's betrayal of Mir Jafar:

> So bad an impression of us did the Revolution create in the Minds of the Country People, that the Burdwan Rajah ... after the Breach of our Faith to the old Nabob, concluding no Reliance was to be placed on our Engagements, he immediately flew off from his former Declarations, and instead of acquiescing under our Government, he began to act in open Rebellion.[56]

Shahzada Ali Gauhar's third and final invasion of Bihar in mid-1760 kept alive Tilakchandra's and others' dream of escaping from the Company's and the nawab's dual domination. As the Mughal prince advanced toward Bengal, widespread disorders again spread across western Bengal, from Purnia through Birbhum and Burdwan to Midnapur. Raja Asad-ul-Zaman of Birbhum, from whom Mir Qasim was demanding a special revenue payment, was the leading actor in the revolt and he raised 5,000 cavalry and 20,000 foot soldiers. Tilakchandra stopped the Company's trade and suspended his revenue payments. At the same time, Maratha troops overran much of Midnapur and came north into the Burdwan zamindari, at Tilakchandra's invitation. Some of the rebels were found to be carrying letters from the shahzada. The Company and Mir Qasim acted jointly to suppress the rebellion. When Major Martin White informed Tilakchandra he intended to ford the Damodar river near Burdwan town, the raja resisted. An estimated 10,000 troops from Burdwan, Birbhum, and other areas, as well as a body of faqirs, tried to block the Company's

[53] Long (ed.), *Selections*, pp. 319–20.
[54] Letter to Court, 16 Jan. 1761, p. 298.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Council at Fort William to Secret Com., 11 March 1762, First Report from the Committee of Secrecy, Appointed to Enquire into the State of the East India Company, 1772, *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, vol. IV, *East Indies–1772, 1773*, p. 254. Hereafter cited as First Report from the Committee of Secrecy, 1772.

detachment. In the ensuing battle, on 29 December, the Burdwan and allied forces lost some 500 killed and 1,000 wounded – numbers equal to Siraj-ud-daula's losses at Plassey – while the Company had only eleven wounded.[57] After this, Major White proceeded unopposed towards Birbhum where the Company's and nazim's troops easily captured the Birbhum capital of Nagar. Company troops next proceeded to Patna where they defeated the shahzada on 15 January 1761.

The disturbances in Burdwan were over by March 1761. So too probably were zamindari illusions that large numbers of hastily recruited, poorly armed, and ill-trained recruits were a match for the Company's compact, well-drilled, and superiorly equipped detachments. Officials at Calcutta thought the defeat of the Burdwan forces "will have a good effect and it certainly gives us a very just reason for putting the Zemindarry upon what footing we think the most convenient." They assumed that Tilakchandra had been misled by his advisers and that he was "a young weak man" whose "people [are] of no consequence" and were "incapable of giving us any obstruction" in revenue collection.[58]

With mounting military expenses, the Company now set out to maximize its land revenues. The ceded lands of Burdwan, Chittagong, and the Twenty-four Parganas gave the Company 9,000 square miles, or one tenth the area of Bengal. When added to Midnapur district, then in the province of Orissa, the ceded districts had an estimated net revenue of about Rs. 51.5 lakhs, equal to almost one fifth of the land revenue of Bengal.[59] Of the four ceded districts, the Burdwan zamindari was the richest and the one the Company had "most wished to obtain"[60] It included almost 9,000 villages and over 5,000 square miles, much highly cultivated.

The political and economic authority of local kings, of course, had not been absolute under the Mughals. Rather, the government of Bengal and the Mughal emperor had delegated a share of authority to the zamindars. Each time revenues fell short of the government's demand, the government employed humiliating coercive measures that cut into the rajas autonomy and diminished what C.A. Bayly has called the dignity of local kingship. The East India Company, with overwhelming military superiority and insistent fiscal needs, was prepared to intrude even further than nawabs had been. It began in Mughal fashion by sending a military force to Burdwan to compel the raja's officers to come to Calcutta in December 1760 to sign a new revenue agreement and receive khilats from the Company. It set the net revenue demand for 1760-61 at Rs. 23.38 lakhs, but knowing how unsettled Burdwan political loyalties were,

57 Ibid. and Long (ed.), *Selections*, pp. 350–53.
58 Letters to Court, 16 Jan. 1761, *Ft Wm-IHC*, vol. III, *1760–1763*, pp. 298–99 and 326–28.
59 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," pp. 254–55.
60 Letter to Court, 16 Jan. 1761, p. 290.

it allowed deductions of over Rs. 22 lakhs for 1759-60 and 1760-61 on account of losses caused by the Maratha and the shahzada's armies.[61]

Collecting land revenue in an agriculturally rich area such as Burdwan offered enticing profits to Company officials and local notables alike. The secret of successful revenue settlements was the creation of mutually beneficial arrangements between Company employees and key dependents of the Burdwan raj. After the Shahzada's final invasion and the end of the disturbances in Burdwan in March 1761, William Brightwell Sumner arrived in Burdwan to investigate the revenues and negotiate a new settlement. Sumner later stated that an agent of the raja offered Sumner and another official Rs. 6 lakhs if they would keep the settlement low. Sumner said they refused.[62] Instead the net demand for 1761-62 was raised to Rs. 30 lakhs, to which was added Rs. 4,11,857 for the previous year's arrears and Rs. 2,50,000 for the Company's military costs in putting down the rebellion in Burdwan.[63] Sumner paid the raja's soldiers their back pay to remove a potential source of trouble. The raja's amla aided Sumner by identifying ways to add to the collections. Gokhal Majumdar, a principal raj employee, suggested that land held rent-free or at only 5 annas per bigha by learned men, if assessed at 8 annas, would add over Rs. 1 lakh to the revenues. In making this suggestion, Gokhal informed the Company that the "worth" of this land had doubled in an unspecified period, from 12 annas per bigha to 1 rupee 8 annas.[64] This information may have strengthened Company servants in their belief that the zamindari could afford a higher assessment. By October 1762, roughly nine-tenths of the net demand for 1761-62 had been collected. The Calcutta authorities rated this a distinct "success."[65] The raja, his officers, and the local gentry were accommodating to the new order. During Mir Qasim's war with the Company in 1763-64, Burdwan remained peaceful.

The Company was practically free to impose whatever settlement it chose upon the Burdwan zamindari without interference from Nawab Mir Qasim. Although the nawab's sanad required the Company to leave the zamindars and tenants on their land, the Calcutta authorities chose to ignore the stipulation. They said that eventually they might measure and divide Burdwan into "small parcels." But at present they considered this unadvisable "when the Country was already full of Commotions.[66] In the meantime, the Company's Resident

[61] Bengal Public Consult., 18 Dec. 1760, Range 1, vol. 32, pp. 767–71.
[62] First Report from the Committee of Secrecy, 1772, p. 163.
[63] Letter to Court, 12 Nov. 1761, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. III, *1760–1763*, p. 370.
[64] Gokhal Majumdar's Estimate of Burdwan Revenues, 1761–62, Committee of New Lands, Accounts Received, 1761, Range 98, vol. 10.
[65] Letter to Court, 30 Oct. 1762, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. III, *1760–1763*, p. 443.
[66] Letter to Court, 16 Jan. 1761, p. 298.

depended on Raja Tilakchandra's officers for information about how much each territorial unit was capable of paying and upon the raja's 29,000 "servants" for collecting the revenue from Burdwan's 8,909 villages.[67] The raja's officers made the annual settlement with the local revenue payers in the presence of and under the general supervision of senior Company officials. Orders were issued under the raja's seals, collections were made by the raja's officers in the raja's kacharis, as they would be for the next three decades, with a few interruptions.

The one-year settlement of 1761 divided the zamindari into three categories of holdings. The raja and his family were permitted to hold land with a jama of Rs. 4,96,900 without any increase on the previous year's demand. In addition, the Company allowed the raja over Rs. 2 lakhs for his expenses and close to Rs. 4 lakhs for his troops.[68] The Company's initial failure to insist either on a reduction in his expenses and troop pay[69] or on a revenue increase for the lands managed by Tilakchandra and his relatives may be presumed to have been an effort to guarantee their cooperation in imposing an increase on the rest of the zamindari. Allowing the Burdwan raj family and their amla to hold lands at a favourable rate became an important strategy in the Company's successful management of Burdwan and it reflected an estimation of the family's and amla's power either to assist or create trouble for the Company.

The second category of lands in the 1761 settlement were lands, often whole parganas with several hundred villages each, that were settled "by private Agreement" with local notables.

The third and most interesting category were the lots (*ijaras*) sold at public auction to revenue farmers (ijaradars), including Calcutta banians. The auction continued for twenty days, during which 669 ijaras of varying sizes were sold to the highest bidders. These lands were assessed at Rs. 16.9 lakhs or almost half of the total demand.[70] Selling land revenue collection rights to ijaradars for short periods became a general Company policy in the 1760s and 1770s. The practice gained notoriety because it failed to bring in the expected revenues, it displaced zamindars from their customary role as revenue collectors, and it led to oppression of tenants and confusion in accounting practices.

Farming of the revenue to temporary collectors had been officially discouraged and considered an act of *zulum* (oppression) from Akbar's through

[67] Letter from Court, 24 Dec. 1765, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. IV, *1764–1766*, p. 121.

[68] Ibid.

[69] However, the Company did resume Rs. 1 lakh each for chakaran or rent-free lands of "land servants" and *mahattaran* or maintenance land for non-Brahmins of respectable status. Gokhal Majumdar's Estimate of Burdwan Revenues, 1760–61, no. 6, Committee of New Lands, Accounts Received, 1761, Range 98, vol. 10.

[70] Abstract Inventory of the Burdwan Lands and their Revenues, 1760–61, and Accounts of Burdwan Lands Rented at Public Sale, 1761, nos. 17 and 19, Committee of New Lands, Accounts Received, Range 98, vol. 10.

Aurangzib's reign. However, the practice was far from unknown and was even common in the Deccan and in frontier areas and areas in which the state wished to extend cultivation. It also may have been common in the jagirs of officers who served at a considerable distance from their assigned lands. Revenue farming was "a characteristic response to ... financial crisis" and thus spread widely in the eighteenth century.[71] The state or its officers often accepted secret payments from the farmers in addition to the stipulated jama and typically competitive bidding increased the jama, if not the collections, above what hereditary holders had paid. Thus it was a favorite method of settlement in periods of fiscal pressure. In Bengal, Mir Qasim (1760-63) resorted to farming as he tried to raise the collections and dispense with the expensive agencies of the zamindars in the nawabi or non-ceded territories. Henry Colebrooke wrote that revenue farming in Bengal "did not become universal" until this period.[72] Company officials, accustomed to competitive bidding in their commercial activities, were predisposed towards revenue farming. In and around Calcutta they had farmed out excise taxes as well as agricultural lands to contractors before 1757.[73] With this experience and the spread of farming under the nazim, Company officers viewed leases through competitive bidding as a natural alternative to collecting through reluctant zamindars in their new territories.

Revenue farming also appealed to Company servants as a means of supplementing their salaries. Company servants overseeing revenue settlements took bribes from farmers in return for accepting their bids. They also held farms themselves at an undervalue and either sold them at a profit to Indian ijaradars or they turned them over to their own banians to manage. As they replaced nawabi and zamindari officials in the governing of Bengal, they used their power with little restraint to enrich themselves. When parliamentary investigations later sought explanations for the decline in both the Bengal government's revenues and the Company's profits, critics attacked the manipulation of the farming system for private gain.[74]

Revenue farming was broadened in Burdwan in May 1762 when John Johnstone arrived there as the new Resident. Johnstone was probably the most notorious of the Company's servants accused of profiting from both revenue farming and private trade. He previously served as Resident in Midnapur, a post

[71] Wink, *Land and Sovereignty*, pp. 340–49. Also, Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 159, 234–35, 277–78, and 284–85; B.R. Grover, "Nature of Land-Rights in Mughal India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 1, no. 1 (July-Sept. 1963), pp. 9–10; Moreland, *Agrarian System*, pp. 158–199, and 205; Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, pp. 408-09.

[72] Colebrooke, *Remarks*, p. 53.

[73] George Blyn, "Revenue Administration of Calcutta in the First Half of the 18th Century," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 1, no. 4 (April-June 1964), p. 134.

[74] For example, see Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, pp. 192–93, and Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 855.

for which he was considered qualified because of his command of "the Moor's language and thought."[75] When Johnstone settled Burdwan for 1762-63, he expanded the auction system and farmed out the whole zamindari, except the raja's own estate valued at Rs. 5.7 lakhs,[76] to the highest bidders for a term of three years. Johnstone hoped that the auction process would free him from reliance upon the raja's officers whose advice about the value of particular territorial units could not be trusted. Johnstone believed that an open market for revenue-collecting rights would reveal the true value of the individual units. He mistakenly assumed that the auction-buyers would not bid more than the lots were capable of yielding. He professed surprise that the farmers agreed to pay more than they could collect from their under-renters. He had no such difficulty in the territories he personally farmed because when other potential bidders saw that Europeans planned to bid, they remained silent, thus enabling Johnstone and his partners, William Hay and William Bolts, to obtain the largest farms at a low value.[77] Indian employees of the Company also farmed many of the most valuable lands at a favorable rate.[78]

The bidding at the public "outcry" in the summer of 1762 was so competitive that the total revenue commitment rose to Rs. 43,53,548, or Rs. 10 lakhs more than it had been in 1760.[79] Many revenue farmers not only found that the rents were not equal to their contracts, they discerned that bankers would not lend to men with such short contracts. In the first year, the arrears were almost Rs. 9 lakhs. In the second year many farmers relinquished their farms.[80] By the end of the three-year settlement, in the spring of 1765, the accumulated arrears exceeded Rs. 26 lakhs.[81] When Burdwan lands were put up for auction for a second three-year period in 1765, acceptable bids were received for only slightly more than two-fifths of the land, and many of those bids were *benami* (false name) offers from Company servants and their Indian banians and government employees. The rest of the land was managed *khas* (without intermediaries) by Company amils until Harry Verelst arrived to replace Johnstone in the autumn of 1765.[82]

When Verelst came to Burdwan in 1765 to reform Johnstone's system, he found that Raja Tilakchandra was poorly informed about Burdwan affairs and "without the respect due to his office." The raja had gone to Calcutta to complain

75 Bengal Public Consult., 8 Nov. 1760, Range 1, vol. 32, p. 390.
76 Letter from Court, 24 Dec. 1765, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. IV, *1764–1766*, p. 121.
77 Harry Verelst, *A View of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the English Government in Bengal* (London, 1772), appendix, p. 53.
78 Ibid., p. 217.
79 Ibid., p. 214.
80 Ibid., pp. 70–71.
81 Ibid., p. 215.
82 Ibid., pp. 71 and 217.

about Johnstone's administration but had been forcibly returned to Burdwan without being granted a hearing. The raja and his officers had reason to be unhappy. The officers, including Gokhal Majumdar, Ramkant Roy, Diwan Amirchandra, and his nephew, Manikchandra, had held valuable lots under the raja in the past,[83] some of which under Johnstone they either lost to other bidders or had to overbid or pay bribes to retain. They saw their own influence in zamindari management slip. Moreover, the auction system was threatening to damage the total value of the zamindari. Farmers who overbid pressed their tenants to pay more rent than they were willing or able to pay. And the farmers, with no guarantee of holding the ijara for more than three years, failed to advance the customary loans for cultivation. The result was that many tenants abandoned their lands, further reducing the ijaradars' ability to fulfill their revenue obligations.[84]

Tilakchandra himself was deeply in debt to Jagat Seth and other creditors, some of whom were said to have lent him "the whole of their fortunes."[85] By September 1764, the raja's debts had risen to Rs. 43 lakhs,[86] a sum many times larger than his annual allowance and profits from the part of the zamindari under his own management. He owed Rs. 15 lakhs to the estate of Omichand. In 1765, Lord Clive induced Omichand's Khatri executor, Hazari Mal, to write off Rs. 3.1 lakhs of that debt,[87] perhaps to make it easier for Tilakchandra to pay his sizeable debts to Company servants. Tilakchandra was not only borrowing from Company servants, he was also making large payments to British officers stationed in Burdwan.[88]

Verelst was determined to reform this deteriorating situation. He decided that farming of the revenues for short periods through public auctions violated the customs of the country[89] and, like khas management, was an inefficient method of collecting the revenue. Therefore he revised the settlement concluded a few months earlier. He set out to force those farmers who were government employees to quit their offices or give up their farms. And he dismissed "the vermin" who had been appointed amils in the khas land and, in their place, settled with "substantial people" at a moderate rent for the first year but increasing rents in

83 Accounts of Burdwan Lands Rented at Public Sale, 1761.

84 Verelst, *View*, pp. 70–71 and 214–15.

85 Ibid., p. 218.

86 Letter from Court, 24 Dec. 1765, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. IV, *1764–1766*, p. 123.

87 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. I, p. 246.

88 Lord Clive wrote in December 1765 that John Graham and A. William Senior had each received over Rs. 1 lakh from the raja. George Rusby Kaye and Edward Hamilton Johnstone, *India Office Library Catalogue of Manuscripts in European Languages*, vol. II (London, 1937), p. 48. Verelst said the Burdwan Council "took an annual stipend" of almost Rs. 80,000 "from the Rajah, in addition to the Company's salary." Verelst, *View*, p. 136.

89 Verelst, *View*, p. 137.

each of the following two years. He negotiated settlements with each contractor instead of holding auctions. His assurances that the Company intended to continue the contractors in their lands if they behaved well, rather than return to the auction or khas systems, persuaded many persons to enter agreements with the Company for a lease with annual increases.[90] Despite the annual increments, the lease-holders managed to pay their revenues without apparent trouble. The Burdwan revenues were paid in full before the end of 1766-67[91] and the arrears in 1767-68 were only Rs. 58,832.[92]

Verelst's colleagues in Calcutta and the Court of Directors in London agreed that public auctions of the revenues violated Indian custom, failed to maximize the revenues, and afforded numerous opportunities for embezzlement and deception. The Court remarked that farming "appears to have been deemed by the natives an act of oppression and contrary to the customs of Indostan." The Court of Directors suggested that the Burdwan settlement should have been made with Raja Tilakchandra and ordered the Calcutta authorities to settle with the rajas of large zamindaris wherever the rajas were capable people.[93] Accordingly the three-year 1768 settlement for the Burdwan zamindari was made with Raja Tilakchandra, although by mutual agreement between Verelst and the raja, Verelst's banian, Gokhalchandra Ghosal, was permitted to farm lands worth over Rs. 6 lakhs. Burdwan's total rent roll in 1768 was Rs. 43,53,923, which gave the Company a net income of Rs. 36,50,000 after deducting the zamindar's allowances and troop expenses.[94] This was Rs. 2 lakhs higher than the first year of Verelst's 1765 settlement.

The zamindari returned to Tilakchandra's management in 1768 employed substantially fewer zamindari servants than it had a decade earlier when it was first assigned to the Company. In the first decade of British control, the Company searched for means of compensating for arrears by introducing economies in Burdwan's management, by cutting back the numbers of people supported by zamindari salaries and rent-free lands. In 1761, William Sumner raised the revenue by Rs. 1 lakh by dismissing over 4,000 of the 10,363 "land servants" and resuming their chakaran (rent-free support lands.)[95] John Johnstone employed seventy persons in an eight-month investigation of Burdwan lands held in bazi zamin or rent-free tenure.[96] The survey revealed that almost

90 Ibid., p. 71.
91 Letter to Court, 30 March 1767, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. V, *1767–1769* (Delhi, 1959), p. 315.
92 Letter to Court, 13 Sept. 1768, ibid., p. 442.
93 Letter from Court, 17 May 1766, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. IV, *1764–1766*, p. 186.
94 Letters to Court, 13 Sept. 1768 and 2 Feb. 1769, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. V, *1767–1769*, pp. 442 and 510.
95 Kalicharan Mitra's and Other's Estimates of Burdwan Revenues, 1761–2, no. 7, Committee of New Lands, Accounts Received, 1761, Range 98, vol. 10.
96 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative View," p. 416.

one fifth of the arable lands in the zamindari fell into this category. He imposed a special cess of 9 annas per bigha, or less than half the normal rent, on these lands.[97] Johnstone also reduced the size of the raja's army by paring the military payroll from almost Rs. 4 lakhs to Rs. 2.64 lakhs.[98] In 1767, further reductions were made in the raja's 8,500 armed retainers, which were exclusive of the "inferior ones."[99] The raja's naqdi or household guard was cut from 1,487 to 839 men. At roughly the same time, chakaran land used to support village paiks, employed in collecting and escorting the rents and protecting the villages, was resumed, bringing an additional Rs. 1.2 lakhs to government account.[100] The Company's Burdwan officers wrote in September 1767 about "the dread of the people ... of the oppression of the discharged troops." These and similar reforms elsewhere in Bengal were believed to be a cause of the subsequent growth of dakaiti (gang robbery) as dismissed soldiers and paiks turned to crime to support themselves.[101]

The dismissal of thousands of Raja Tilakchandra's employees seemed to have no adverse effect on his revenue collections. From the return of the zamindari to his management in 1768 until his death in 1770, his relations with the Company were relatively free from friction. Verelst and others believed that they were restoring the collecting mechanism to its traditional form with local notables bringing in the revenue under the zamindar's authority. On the other hand, the Company did keep a supervisor at Burdwan. And it maintained sepoys at Burdwan to enforce the revenue collections if needed.[102] It is not recorded how often those sepoys were sent from their barracks to help or coerce the local revenue contractors. Nor is it known if Hastings' 1772 observation that the Company's sepoys employed in revenue collection "turn money-lenders, Administrators of Justice, and Judges of property"[103] applies to the Company sepoys at Burdwan. What is recorded is that the Burdwan zamindari paid up virtually the full demand during its three-year settlement which included the famine, after falling into arrears in the first two years.[104]

The Court of Directors in November 1768 urged the Calcutta authorities to give Raja Tilakchandra "all the Indulgences which can any way alleviate the loss of real Power and Dignity" he had suffered in the early years of the

97 Verelst, *View*, pp. 71 and 214.
98 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative View," p. 413.
99 W.W. Hunter, *Bengal MS. Records: A Selected List of 14,136 Letters in the Board of Revenue, Calcutta, 1782–1807, with an Historical Dissertation and Analytical Index* (4 vols., London, 1884), vol. I, p. 99.
100 Long (ed.), *Selections*, articles 954, 955, and 958.
101 Warren Hastings, Minute on Dakaiti, BOR Prog. of 19 April 1774, vol. 10, part II.
102 Letters to Court, 5 Dec. 1766 and 16 March 1768, *Ft Wm-IHC*, vol. IV, *1764–1766*, pp. 473–74, and vol. V, *1767–1769*, pp. 99–100.
103 M.E. Monckton Jones, *Warren Hastings in Bengal, 1772–1774* (Oxford, 1918), p. 373.
104 Fourth Report from the Committee of Secrecy, 1773, pp. 100–01.

Company's administration.[105] They also ordered that "the Rajah and his ministers," and not Company officers, should settle disputes in his zamindari.[106] The Calcutta authorities approved the raja's request for waste lands to endow a temple "as it will contribute much to aggrandise him without affecting the Company's real interest."[107] They also transmitted a request to Emperor Shah Alam II to elevate Tilakchandra's titles to *maharajadhiraja* (great king of kings) and *panch hazari zat* or commander of 5,000. These were conferred on Tilakchandra in 1768.[108] The Company had reversed itself and restored to the raja part of the authority it had taken away. In the late 1760s, the revenue system established by Harry Verelst was being hailed as a model, especially when contrasted with Johnstone's public auctions or the annual contracts with government amils in the diwani lands.[109]

In 1769, both the Court of Directors and the Calcutta authorities decided to assert a fuller British control over land management. The Court sent a letter ordering Company servants to manage the diwani lands. Before the letter arrived, the government in Calcutta, thinking along the same lines, appointed Supervisors to go into the mofussil and prepare a rent roll that would be "restrictive to the collector and indulgent to the ryot" and enable the Company to make "a just and satisfactory settlement." Zamindars, resistant to the growing revenue demands and jealous of their traditional freedoms, obstructed the Supervisors.[110]

By the famine of 1770, the position of the zamindars and the government methods of rural control had evolved substantially from Alivardi's time in Company and diwani lands. The revenue demand had grown dramatically everywhere but without the local surveys that alone would have determined whether production, agricultural prices, and rents were capable of meeting it. The traditional accountancy and military checks on the zamindars, in the institutions of the qanungos and faujdars, had fallen into disuse.[111] To enforce their unprecedented demands, the Company and the Murshidabad governments had interfered in what had been largely autonomous zamindari management. They had appointed residents, diwans, amils, and *sazawals* (temporary collectors) who either exercised joint authority with the zamindars or suspended their authority almost entirely. The age of the semi-autonomous raja was drawing to a close.

105 Letter from Court, 11 Nov. 1768, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. V, *1767–1769*, p. 149.
106 Khan, *Transition*, p. 269.
107 Letter to Court, 14 March 1768, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. V, *1767–1769*, p. 391.
108 *Burdwan Handbook*, p. 10.
109 Letters to Court, 30 June and 30 Sept. 1769, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. V, *1767–1769*, pp. 211–12 and 600–01.
110 Ramsbotham, *Studies*, pp. 5-10.
111 Akhtar, *Role of the Zamindars*, pp. 76-77.

10 The famine of 1770

Historically Bengal has been, relative to other parts of India, immune to large-scale failures of the monsoon. The only major famines in Bengal in the past three centuries have been in 1770, 1866, and 1943-44. Generally sufficient rainfall and low variability, relative to other parts of the subcontinent, are special features of Bengal's climate. The western districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, and Hughli average between fifty and sixty inches of rain annually while the central and eastern districts receive more.

The famine of 1770 was one of the greatest calamities in Bengal's history. It carried off between one sixth and one third of the population. Coming in the wake of the Maratha invasions and the unparalleled revenue exactions of Siraj-ud-daula, Mir Qasim, and the East India Company, the famine must have left many Bengalis wondering whether a darker *yuga* (age) or the wrath of the deities had descended on their society. Despite the high mortality and suffering, there were few signs that people blamed human agency for the absence of relief. As in the subsequent famines,[1] there was little violence, even when the East India Company refused to lower its revenue demands on the survivors. That refusal, we may infer, limited the ability of revenue payers to indulge their dependents, as was customary, as they struggled to resume cultivation of deserted fields and attract replacements for deceased laborers.

Before the 1770 famine, there was a British consensus that Bengal's economy was deteriorating. The signs were evident in the severe shortage of coin, the shrinking of Bengal's internal trade, and the decline in the net land revenue collections. From 1766-67 to 1769-70, the Company's net land revenue annually declined, from £ 2,550,094 to £ 2,118,294. In the same years, the cost of the Company's civil and military charges began to approach the net land revenue collections, rising annually, from £ 1,274,093 to £ 1,752,556.[2] The Calcutta Council had warned in 1768 of the "danger of complete breakdown in

1 Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, p. 11.

2 Third Report from the Committee of Secrecy, Appointed to Enquire into the State of the East India Company, 1773, *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, vol. IV, *East Indies – 1772, 1773*, pp. 60–61.

the commercial life of Bengal."[3] Richard Becher, Resident at Murshidabad, lamented in 1769 on the economic decline of the diwani territories, observing that there was

> reason to think, that since the accession of the Company to the Diwani, the condition of the people of this country has been worse that it was before ... This fine country, which flourished under the most despotic and arbitrary government, is verging towards its ruin, while the English have really as great a share in its administration.[4]

While Governor Verelst, the Select Committee at Calcutta, and Richard Becher blamed the oppressive collection practices of the nawab's officers and the export of silver from Bengal for the economic decline,[5] the causes were also rooted in the Company's reliance on the land revenue to finance its exports and in allowing its employees to divert trade into their own and dependents' hands and to remove huge sums of money, taken as farming profits, trading profits, and "presents," from Bengal's economy. The 1770 famine confirmed and deepened the economic crisis; it did not create it. Even before the famine there was a marked sense of crisis in Bengal.[6]

Although the rains were lighter than normal in late 1768, the tragedy for many families in eastern Bihar, north-western and central Bengal, and the normally drier sections of far-western Bengal began when the summer rains of 1769 failed entirely through much of that area. The result was that the aman crop, which is harvested in November, December, and January, and provided roughly 70 percent of Bengal's rice, was negligible. Rains in February 1770 induced many cultivators to plough but the following dry spell withered the crops. The monsoon of June 1770 was good. However, by this time food supplies had long been exhausted and heavy mortality continued at least until the aus harvest in September.

W.W. Hunter wrote the classic description of this event:

> All through the stifling summer of 1770 the people went on dying. The husbandmen sold their cattle; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed-grain; they sold their sons and daughters, till at length no buyer of children could be found; they [ate] the leaves of trees and the grass of the field; and in June 1770 the Resident at the Durbar affirmed that the living were feeding on the dead.[7]

James Grant wrote in 1792:

> In the country the highways and fields were strewed, in towns the streets and passages

3 Ainslie T. Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India* (New York, 1962), p. 31.
4 Dodwell (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, vol. V, p. 207.
5 Banerjee, *Early Land Revenue System*, pp. 44–45. Also, Letter to Court, 30 Sept. 1769, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. V, *1767–1769*, pp. 600–02.
6 Dodwell (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, vol. V, p. 207.
7 William Wilson Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (London, 1868), p. 26.

choaked, with the dying and the dead. Multitudes flocked to Moorshedabad, the capital ... In Moorshedabad alone 7,000 were daily fed for several months, and the same practice was followed in other places; but the good effects were hardly discernible amidst the general devastation ... It was impossible to stir abroad without breathing an offensive air, without hearing frantic cries, and seeing numbers of different ages and sexes in every state of suffering and death ... At length a gloomy calm succeeded.[8]

Few contemporary observers left detailed accounts of the famine. One of the fullest came from an anonymous Company servant in Calcutta who wanted a friend in London to believe that food shortages had been worsened by "Gentlemen in the Company's service" who had bought "rice at 120 and 140 Seers for a Rupee, which they afterwards sold for 15 Seers for a Rupee, to the Black Merchants."[9] His account was published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in London in September 1771. Although the charges of profiteering were never proven, the Court of Directors believed that "the ryots were compelled to sell their rice to those monopolizing Europeans." W.K. Firminger speculated that the charges may have arisen from well-intentioned efforts by district officials to prevent rice from leaving the areas which they controlled.[10] In any case, the anonymous author of the account of the famine in Calcutta wrote that "many thousands" of hungry people came into the city seeking relief after supplies ran out in Murshidabad:

Many thousands falling daily in the streets and fields, whose bodies, mangled by dogs, jackalls, and vultures ... made us dread the consequences of a plague ... I have counted from my bedchamber window in the morning when I got up ... many hundreds laying in the agonies of death for want, bending double, with their stomaches quite close contracted to their back bones. I have sent my servant to desire those who have the strength, to remove further off, whilst the poor creatures, looking up with arms extended, have cried out, Baba! Baba! my Father! my Father! This affliction comes from the hands of your countrymen, and I am come here to die, if it pleases God, in your presence. I cannot move, do what you will with me.[11]

The author said that during the famine Europeans would not eat fish, pigs, ducks, or geese, all of which were feeding on human corpses, so they were restricted to mutton. A hundred poor people gathered at his door to receive the left-overs: "After one had sucked the bones quite dry, and thrown them away, I have seen another take them up, sand and all upon them, and do the same, and

8 James Grant, "Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain," Gen. App. no. 1 to Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, 1832, *British Parliamentary Papers: Colonies, East India*, vol. 5 (Shannon, 1970), p. 11.

9 [Anonymous], "Account of the Late Famine in India," *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, vol. 41 (Sept. 1771), p. 402.

10 *Fifth Report, 1812*, Firminger's Introduction, vol. I, p. cxcix. The Court of Directors also accused Muhammad Reza Khan of cornering rice for private profit. Ibid., p. cc.

11 [Anonymous], "Account of the Late Famine in India," pp. 402–03.

so by a third, and so on." A cloud of insects appeared over Calcutta and its neighboring areas and hovered there for days, obscuring the sun. Brahmins prophesied that "if ever they descended to the earth, the country would be destroyed by some untimely misfortune." They did not descend, but flew away after causing "great speculation."[12]

One of the remarkable features about this account and about reports from the districts is the relative absence of collective violence. Here and there officials noted an increase in dakaiti (gang robbery). Boughton Rous, Supervisor of Rajshahi, reported in 1771 that raiyats "who have hitherto borne the first of characters among their neighbors" had turned to dakaiti to sustain themselves.[13] Yet when Company officials began to discuss the increases in dakaiti in the 1770s, they rarely attributed it to the famine. As they began to take over the administration of diwani lands, starting in 1770, they blamed dakaiti instead on the resumption of service lands (chakaran) from local police employees who then turned to gang robbery, the suspension of the zamindars' police authority under the revenue farming system, and the difficulty of obtaining convictions under Islamic law.[14]

The severest violence was committed by the bands of sannyasis and faqirs from outside the province in their annual pilgrimages across northern Bengal to visit the bathing and other religious fairs and festivals. Members of the bands carried swords, matchlocks, and even rockets. The largest bands included as many as 5,000 mendicants. They expected to subsist on donations from pious and affluent inhabitants. When those donations were not forthcoming, they plundered. Their depredations increased in the immediate aftermath of the famine, and in consequence Company troops moved to block their passage through Bengal. While it is possible that the famine caused inhabitants to be less generous than in the past, this seems not have been suggested in official reports on the sannyasi and faqir incursions.[15] Dakaiti and other forms of collective violence were only occasionally linked to famine by contemporary observers.

Paul Greenough, in his fine study of the Bengal famine of 1943-44, has discussed the failure of Bengalis in 1770 and 1943-44 to break into grain shops and raid the rice supplies of affluent households. Greenough was impressed by

12 Ibid., p. 403.
13 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 64.
14 Warren Hastings' Minute on Dakaiti, 19 April 1774, quoted in *Fifth Report, 1812*, Firminger's Introduction, vol. I, pp. ccxiv-v.
15 Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1930), pp. 41–49. Some historians have treated the sannyasi incursions as if they were connected to the famine without convincingly demonstrating the causal link. See Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 64, and Anil Chandra Bannerjee, *The Agrarian System of Bengal*, vol. I, *1582–1793* (Calcutta, 1980), p. 133.

the contrast between the non-violence of Bengalis and the assertiveness of the lower classes in Europe when faced by scarcity.[16] He cited the observation of Abbé Raynal who found it "remarkable" that, unlike Europeans, Bengalis "pressed by the most urgent of all necessities remained in an absolute inactivity, and made no attempts whatever for their self-preservation ... The unhappy Indians, resigned to despair, confined themselves to the request of succour they did not obtain, and peaceably waited the relief of death." Sometimes they threw "themselves at the feet of the Europeans, entreating them to take them in as their slaves." Had "any part of Europe [been] affected by a similar calamity," Raynal anticipated "disorder," "fury," "atrocious acts," "crimes."[17] E.P. Thompson has written about the frequency of food riots in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England,

> repeated cases of which can be found in almost every town and county until the 1840s. This was rarely a mere uproar which culminated in the breaking open of barns and the looting of shops. It was legitimised by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of an unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people.

These food riots "were popularly regarded as acts of justice."[18]

Paul Greenough has offered an explanation for the absence of violent efforts to obtain food in the 1943-44 famine. He emphasizes that in Bengal's traditional hierarchical society, paternal indulgence was the ideal. Social superiors were expected to protect and share food with their dependent clients and relatives.[19] However, in the rare occurrence of famine in Bengal, patrons gradually abandoned their dependents as their resources gave out. Dependent laborers, tenants, and artisans were let go first. Then less valued members of the family were abandoned. Although the head of the family violated his "ordinary moral obligations" by leaving his family to seek employment or by sending his wife and children away to beg, this was a common way of adapting "to the threat of total familial extinction."[20] Greenough sums up the difference with Europe:

> In the European tradition, famine violence was turned "outward" and "upward" against offending landlords, merchants, and officials; in Bengal the tradition was to turn violence "inward" and "downward" against the clients and dependents. This was the cold violence of abandonment, of ceasing to nourish, rather than of bloodshed and tumult. The

16 Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, pp. 267–70.

17 Abbé Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, tr. J.O. Justomond, vol. I, (2nd edn., London, 1798), p. 437.

18 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966), pp. 62–65, who is cited by Greenough.

19 Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*. pp. 15–25.

20 Ibid., pp. 207–17.

quasi-legal notions in western Europe of subsistence "rights," of a "just price," and of the duty of the state to uphold the "commonweal" gave legitimacy to the hot violence of food disturbances, a legitimacy sometimes conceded by officials who refused to punish enraged looters and leaders of hungry crowds. In Bengal, such notions were entirely absent, and the cold violence of "masters," land-holders, and officials was morally justified only by the need to salvage those who would construct a subsequent prosperity.[21]

This explanation of the absence of collective violence during the Bengal famines is the best we have. Nevertheless, there are unresolved problems with it inasmuch as it implies that deferential Bengalis acquiesced to the abandonment by their traditional patrons and masters. This may not accord with the fact that principal raiyats of late eighteenth-century Bengal seemed to have a strong sense of their *rights* when they believed their landlords were treating them unfairly. They assembled in rowdy crowds, complained to government, and withheld their rents frequently. In addition, beneath the jotdars were numerous low caste peasants on the margins of village society who migrated often and in the early nineteenth century joined dakait gangs by the thousands and terrorized their affluent neighbors. Many Bengalis between the famines of 1770 and 1943-44 were far from acquiescent and compliant when they faced what they perceived to be injustices.

The Company's government might have cushioned the effects of food shortages in 1770 by foregoing some of its revenue demand and mobilizing for the supply of food to the worst-affected areas. This happened only on a small scale. The Company was only beginning to take over the district administration from Muhammad Reza Khan, the naib diwan (deputy finance minister) in the diwani areas of northern and central Bengal. Most of the newly appointed British Supervisors did not take up their posts until February 1770.[22] Officials were smarting from scoldings from London about declining revenues and, incredibly, the Company rejected most requests for revenue remissions. When it did accede to requests, it stipulated that the remissions were temporary and that the arrears were to be paid in the following years. Remissions in 1769-70 equalled but six percent of the year's collections.[23] Government and private distributions of relief were paltry compared to the need. W.W. Hunter reported that government and "native" distributions amounted to £9,000 and £4,700, respectively.[24] These figures amounted to less than 0.1 percent of the government's revenue demand although there was no practical means by which officials could have known how much affluent Indians gave to hungry people.

21 Ibid., pp. 270–71.
22 Nandalal Chatterji, *Verelst's Rule in India* (Allahabad, 1939), p. 254.
23 Banerjee, *Agrarian System of Bengal*, vol. I, p. 131.
24 Hunter, *Annals*, p. 37.

Only the affluent could afford the market prices, which at Murshidabad rose to twenty times the subsequent levels.[25]

Comments from district officials in 1770 and the succeeding decades leave no doubt the famine was a major disaster. Reports of whole villages being deserted, families disappearing, and large areas reverting to jungle make it clear that in the most severely affected areas, recovery would have taken years and that many social bonds must have been dissolved. Yet there is reason to view with skepticism the more extreme estimates of the famine's consequences. These estimates include the assertion that one third of Bengal's population perished; that one third of the cultivated area was abandoned; that two-thirds of Bengal's aristocracy was ruined by the famine.[26]

Estimates of both the pre-famine population and famine mortality were matters of wild guesses, stabs in the dark. James Rennell estimated in 1781 that Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa (i.e., Midnapur) had 10 million inhabitants. Harry Verelst stated in the same year that the population was "at least" 7 million.[27] James Grant in 1786 thought this area contained 10 million people.[28] Alexander Dow wrote in about 1770 that "Bengal" had 15 million people, but the dimensions he ascribed to Bengal (600 x 300 miles)[29] could have covered an area double that referred to by Rennell, Verelst, and Grant. Subsequent historians have raised their estimates of the population. W.W. Hunter, writing almost a century after the famine, thought the Company's territory in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa contained 30 million people before the famine.[30] Both N.K. Sinha[31] and Paul Greenough[32] estimated that close to 10 million may have died, implying a pre-famine population of at least 30 million.

Warren Hastings estimated in 1772, soon after he returned to Bengal as Governor, that "at least one-third of the inhabitants of the province" were lost in the famine.[33] This estimate has been accepted by most historians who have written about the famine. But where did this estimate come from? The Supervisors of both Bhagalpur[34] and Purnia[35] reported in April and May 1770, well before the famine ended, that one third of the local inhabitants had died.

25 Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 144. On Murshidabad, see Gautam Bhadra, "The Famine of 1770 and the Town of Murshidabad," *Marxist Miscellany: A Collection of Essays*, no. 7 (New Delhi, 1975), pp. 27–47.
26 Hunter, *Annals*, pp. 56–58.
27 Report on Petitions, 1781, p. 37.
28 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative Analysis," p. 271.
29 Dow, *History*, vol. I, p. cxxxvi.
30 Hunter, *Annals*, p. 34.
31 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 55.
32 Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, p. 267.
33 Letter to Court, 3 Nov. 1772, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. VI, *1770–1772*, (Delhi, 1960) p. 418.
34 Nani Gopal Chaudhuri, *Cartier: Governor of Bengal, 1769–1772* (Calcutta, 1970), p. 40.
35 Letter to Court, 9 May 1770, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. VI, *1770–1772*, p. 203.

Table 2 *Deserted land, 1778*

	Hastobud jama(Rs)	*Plateka* (Rs.)
Birbhum	11,44,825	4,11,613
Jahangirpur (Dinajpur district)	3,63,570	1,04,629
Purnia	19,09,214	4,96,168
Rangpur	16,50,655	3,71,695

G. Ducarel, Supervisor of Purnia, later raised his estimate to "nearly half."[36] Richard Becher, Resident at Murshidabad, reported in June that "the number that has perished in those provinces that have most suffered is calculated to have been, within these four months, as six to sixteen of the whole inhabitants." He then added in July that "previous representations" were "faint in comparison to the miseries now endured."[37] There seem to have been few efforts by officers on the spot to count systematically the deaths in any single district, although a survey of four tarafs (divisions of a pargana) in the Rajshahi zamindari showed that of 1,076 families, 507 families died and 153 migrated, leaving 416 families.[38] Even if half of the population of the Bihari-speaking districts of Bhagalpur and Purnia and of the worst-affected parts of the Bengali districts of Rajmahal, Rajshahi, and Birbhum had died, there would be reason to doubt that the total mortality for Bengal was one third. The suffering in the rest of western and central Bengal was certainly severe, mortality and migration were higher than usual, but the reports from officers on the spot do not suggest a level of mortality that would have produced a province-wide death rate of one third.

Evidence of the uneven effects of the famine appears in the figures compiled by the Amini Commission which reported in 1778. The Commission listed only four areas in which the *plateka* or rated revenue of unoccupied land that remained on the revenue rolls exceeded the *hastobud jama* or "gross revenue" by over 20 percent (see table 2).

Other areas in which the *plateka* was between 10 percent and 20 percent of the jama were Nadia, Mahomedshahi, Jessore, Saidpur, Alisoda, Pachet, Fateh Singh, Laskarpur, and Rajmahal. This evidence indicates that depopulation was most severe north of the Ganges and in Birbhum, moderately severe in central Bengal, and slight in southwest and eastern Bengal. The huge districts of Dacca and Rajshahi were reported to have no *plateka*.[39]

36 Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Paris, 1963), p. 54.
37 Hunter, *Annals*, p. 418.
38 Chaudhuri, *Cartier*, pp. 70-71.
39 Appendix to Amini Report, Ramsbotham, *Studies*, pp. 132–33.

Table 3 *Net revenue collections, 1768–69 to 1771-72*

1768–69	Rs. 1,52,54,856
1769–70	1,31,49,148
1770–71	1,40,06,030
1771–72	1,53,33,660

The rapidity with which land revenue collections recovered casts further doubt on the estimates that one third of the population perished and one third of the cultivated land was abandoned. The net collections fell in the year of the drought but rose in the following two years (see table 3).[40]

No doubt the increased collections may be attributed in part to the fact that post-drought collections were "violently" made, as Warren Hastings stated,[41] although Company officials believed that the nawab's government had also been using violent means to gather the revenue in the diwani lands in the years preceding the famine. The 14 percent decline in the 1772-73 collections[42] was partly due to population loss but other factors included the disruptive effects of the transfer of the diwani lands to Company administration and to the transfer of zamindari lands to revenue farmers with five-year leases. Many of these auction-purchasers were unpopular and inefficient and were impeded by displaced zamindars and their dependents. Moreover, 1772-73 was a year of an abundant harvest which depressed agricultural prices, and in turn damaged collections.[43] Thus the collection figures for the years immediately after the famine, while not disproving the estimate of one third mortality leave open the possibility that deaths among the cultivating population were significantly lower than implied by the estimate of an overall population loss of a third.

Contemporary witnesses suggested that mortality was exceptionally high among the non-cultivating population, including weavers, spinners, silk-winders, boatmen, and salt and *chunam* (lime) workers, as well as among growers of non-food products such as cotton and silk-worms.[44] The Resident at Dacca, where the famine was not notably severe, reported in 1776 that "the Dacca fabric for these six or seven years has been upon the decline as to quality, great part whereof may be attributed to the ravages of the famine in 1770 carrying away

40 Letter to Court, 3 Nov. 1772, *Ft Wm-IHC*, vol. VI, 1770–1772, p. 418.
41 Ibid., p. 419.
42 J.C. Sinha, *Economic Annals of Bengal* (London, 1927), p. 102.
43 Hunter, *Annals*, p. 31.
44 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. I, pp. 15, 20, and 190; Chaudhuri, *Cartier*, pp. 70-71; and Letter to Court, 3 Dec. 1772, *Ft Wm-IHC*, vol. VI, *1770–1772*, p. 451.

Table 4 *Cotton and silk investments, 1768–75*

Season	Piece goods (£)	Silk(£)
1768	500,597	137,299
1769	576,281	142,328
1770	451,152	160,337
1771	571,542	170,457
1772	697,778	136,270
1773	508,622	94,431
1774	466,944	160,016
1775	659,255	239,514

great numbers of the best spinners and ryots who cultivated the cotton plant."[45] The Malda weavers and the silk producers around Murshidabad were also decimated. On the other hand, the weaving villages around Chandrakona and Kirpai in the Burdwan zamindari and around Santipur in Nadia, suffered much less. George Vansittart in 1775 noted a decline in the textile manufacturers of southern Burdwan and Bishnupur but he blamed this in part upon the rise in prices weavers were forced to demand to compensate for the increase in land taxes "within these twenty years."[46] While it is certain that mortality was higher among artisans and producers of non-food crops than among common cultivators, the invoice values of the Company's investments in cotton piece goods and silk did not develop a downward trend after the famine (see table 4).[47]

The third long-term development attributed by some historians to the famine was the destruction of Bengal's aristocracy. N.K. Sinha wrote that "the old aristocracy [was] ruined by the famine."[48] W.W. Hunter, who regarded the famine as "the key to the history of Bengal during the succeeding forty years,"[49] wrote that "from the year 1770 the ruin of two-thirds of the old aristocracy of Lower Bengal dates."[50] There is little reason to accept these judgments. The zamindars in both the ceded and diwani lands had been experiencing high

45 Debendra Bijoy Mitra, *The Cotton Weavers of Bengal, 1757–1833* (Calcutta, 1978), p. 54.

46 George Vansittart, late chief of Burdwan, to GG, 20 Jan. 1775, Bengal Rev. Consult. Prog. of 27 Jan. 1775, P/49/50.

47 Ninth Report from the Select Committee Appointed to Take into Consideration the State of the Administration of Justice in the Provinces of Bengal, Bahar, and Orissa, 1783, *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, vol. VI, *East Indies–1783*, p. 112. Hereafter cited as Ninth Report on Justice, 1783.

48 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 65.

49 Hunter, *Annals*, p. 19.

50 Ibid., pp. 56–57.

assessments, loss of management to ijaradars, amils, sazawals, and banians of Company employees, and they continued to experience those same pressures after the famine. The impoverishment of major zamindars was a complicated, uneven process. The famine of 1770 probably contributed no more to the process than repeated increases in the revenue demand and periodic suspensions of zamindari authority, both before and after the famine. The famine forced many zamindars to borrow to meet the demand. But then the five-year settlement with revenue farmers in 1772 allowed many zamindars a respite and an opportunity to discharge debts from their *moshaira* (monthly stipend while suspended from office). Most of the major zamindars recovered their territories in their pre-famine dimensions in 1777 and still retained them at the time of the Decennial Settlement of 1790.

The final general question to consider is whether the famine led to a general shift of relative power among the various classes of cultivators and rent collectors. Answering that question is problematical because the Company's introduction of revenue farming in Burdwan and the Twenty-four Parganas in 1771 and in the rest of Bengal in 1772 was itself a disturbing factor in agrarian relations. What impressed most contemporary observers in the 1770s and 1780s, as well as subsequent analysts, was the strong position of the mandals and other superior raiyats vis-à-vis both the common cultivators and the superior rent collectors. Where they differ is whether the advantages of the mandals derived from the famine or changes in revenue policy. Philip Francis in 1776 implied that surviving raiyats in general had gained from the population decline: "in the present state of the Country the Ryot has the Advantage over the Zemindar. Where so much land lies waste, and so few hands are left for Cultivation, the Peasant must be courted to undertake it."[51] The Amini Commission's report of 1778 seemed to see no such shift and instead saw the mandals as mediating between the raiyats and the petty collectors, lending money to the cultivators, and helping them sell their crops. According to the Amini Commission, since the mandal's "influence and services [depend] solely on the good opinion of the ryots, it is not the interest of the zamindar to change him, so long as he preserves their confidence."[52] W.W. Hunter viewed the famine as crucial in leading to a more pronounced stratification of the peasantry. He identified the enterprising, non-resident or *paikasht* raiyats, rather than the mandals, as the major beneficiaries of the famine. In his view, pre-1770 landlords often oppressed their numerous cultivators. After 1770, there was a severe shortage of cultivators.

By degrees the agricultural population divided itself into two classes: the so-called resident cultivators [*khudkasht*] who, from attachment to their ancient homes, or, as was

51 Extract of Rev. Consult. of 5 Nov. 1776, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 108.
52 Ramsbotham, *Studies*, p. 108.

much more frequently the case, by reason of indebtedness to their landlord, continued on the same estate as before the famine; and a more adventurous class, termed non-resident or vagrant cultivators [paikasht], who threw up their previous holdings and went in search of new ones at the lower rates to which depopulation had reduced the market value of land. Within six years after the famine this classification had distinctly taken place, and the non-resident ryots who had previously formed an insignificant and degraded order continued during thirty years the most prominent feature in the rural system of Bengal.[53]

Paikasht raiyats often formed new villages just beyond the boundaries of their former zamindaris so they would be beyond the jurisdictions of their former masters and be able better to resist efforts to force them to return. Their new zamindars gave them concessionary rental rates, often half of what the khudkasht raiyats paid, and the privilege of paying rents in kind. In time, if not immediately, the long-resident cultivators came to resent the privileged position of the paikasht raiyats. To prevent the resulting tension from interfering with rent collection, zamindars and government officials gradually reduced the differential between the two classes of peasants. The problem seems to have been most severe in Birbhum district, to which paikasht raiyats had migrated from Burdwan, Murshidabad, and Rajshahi and in 1788 paid almost one tenth of the district's jama.[54]

Ratna Ray's more balanced and cautious assessment is that jotdars with capital, whether resident or not, seized the opportunity "to bring the waste lands under their own cultivation." While acknowledging that depopulation strengthened the position of wealthy jotdars in many areas, she warns against seeing jotdar oligarchies' command of village labor and resources as new or sudden. Their dominance, which rested on privileged rental rates, control of the most productive lands, money-lending and marketing activities, access to capital, and their utility to intermediate revenue collectors, dated back to Mughal times.[55]

While mandals and other affluent jotdars seem to have been strategically placed to benefit from deserted lands following the famine, several factors operated to limit their advantage and to guarantee that until the 1790's, at least, power over villages' surpluses would be precariously balanced and shared between the rich jotdars, the kutkinadars, ijaradars, and other intermediate revenue collectors, and the zamindars. After the famine, the surviving cultivators were required to pay a special cess that represented the revenue that their neighbors who died or migrated would have paid. This customary imposition, called the *najai*, dates back to the seventeenth century at least.[56] Its effect may

53 Hunter, *Annals*, pp. 59-60.

54 Rajan Kumar Gupta, *The Economic Life of a Bengal District, Birbhum: 1770–1857* (Calcutta, 1984), pp. 38–41. Also, Hunter, *Bengal MS. Records*, vol. I. pp. 62–63.

55 Ray, *Change*, pp. 54–59.

56 Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 250.

have been to cause some villagers to flee; in other cases, it led villagers to prevent the migration of their fellow villagers. Warren Hastings believed the *najai* was the main mechanism by which the revenue collections were kept high in the aftermath of the famine and he described it as "a kind of security against desertion by making the inhabitants thus mutually responsible for each other."[57] Second, close to half of Bengal's land was taken in farm in 1772 by auction-purchasers who were not zamindars and who often used coercive measures to realize the higher revenue demand they had bid for. These coercive measures would have tended to nullify the competitive advantages jotdars were said to have gained in relation to superior collectors in the post-famine years although an unknown portion of jotdars struck advantageous bargains with the ijaradars and acted instead as coercive agents over weaker villagers. And third, there was such a shortage of labor due to famine mortality that the cost of wages jotdars had to pay to bring land back into cultivation rose. Drought also had killed many plough animals and presumably forced up the prices of replacement stock. Therefore, enhanced production costs undercut the profits available to jotdars from reopening abandoned lands.

The Burdwan zamindari suffered less from the famine than Birbhum and the other districts to the north. And the Burdwan jotdars emerged with no new advantages, it seems. Raja Tilakchandra complained in November 1769 that tanks were drying up and that the withered crops were useless except as cattle fodder. Consequently, grain prices were rising and peasants were deserting the land.[58] Nevertheless, the zamindar paid 95 percent of the net demand for 1769-70. In May 1770, Raja Tilakchandra died of "fever" and was succeeded by his five-year-old son, Tejchandra, who was in the custody of his young mother, Rani Bishnumukari. Raja Tejchandra's managers succeeded in paying not only the 1770-71 demand but also the arrears from earlier years. Burdwan's net collections for 1770-71 were 19 percent higher than in 1769-70. The year 1770-71 was the final year of the three-year settlement made with Tilakchandra. The rani and the managers were no doubt anxious to please Company officers so that they might continue to control the zamindari and be in a position to obtain the new settlement in 1771. They had to borrow, in the young Tejchandra's name, from "the Merchants" in order to meet the government's demand and pay the costs of Tilakchandra's shraddha (death rituals).[59]

The Supervisor at Burdwan had proposed to grant a temporary abatement of three lakhs for 1770-71 on account of the alleged loss of peasants but after local inquiries, he reduced the recommended remission to less than 1 lakh on the

57 Letter to Court, 3 Nov. 1772, p. 419.
58 Hunter, *Annals*, p. 408.
59 Petition from Tejchandra, received 14 May 1771, Home Misc., vol. 203.

grounds that the revenue farmers had lost only Rs. 82,120 "by the death or desertion of the ryots."[60] This report and the high 1770-71 Burdwan collections suggest that Burdwan's famine mortality had not been severe and that peasants who fled had returned or been replaced. In 1775, George Vansittart reported after leaving his post at Burdwan that although Birbhum, Pachet, and the northern parganas of Burdwan "suffered a great loss of Inhabitants" during the famine, the population of southern Burdwan and of Midnapur east of the jungle areas "are well peopled," as much so as in 1760. He thought Bishnupur had not suffered "any very considerable loss."[61]

In conclusion, it seems that the usual estimate of a mortality of one third is a less reasonable guess than John Shore's estimate of one fifth[62] or Monckton Jones' of one sixth.[63] Burdwan's mortality may have been considerably less than one sixth. Population may have decreased further in the decade or so following the famine as a result of births averted due to malnutrition and deaths among young girls.[64] In the famine of 1943-44, at least, heads of families in deep distress abandoned the less valued members of their family in order to save it from "total ... extinction," even though this contradicted "ordinary moral obligations."[65] Moreover, the famine brought no proven general alterations in the relations or degrees of wealth between zamindars and the various orders of their tenants although in some areas jotdars with capital and dependent tenants and laborers strengthened their bargaining position with superior rent collectors. Many zamindars temporarily lost control of their estates in 1772. This, however, was not because of the famine but rather because Company officials tried to raise revenue collections by farming them out to the highest bidder. The Company's rejection of zamindari pleas for revenue remissions may have reduced their willingness to enter the bidding process. The government's inflexibility during the years following the famine was further circumscribing zamindari ability to meet society's expectations of a raja's generosity and indulgence to dependents in distress.

60 Letter to Court, 12 Feb. 1771, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. VI, *1770–1772*, p. 276.
61 Bengal Rev. Consults. of 27 Jan. 1775, Home Misc., vol. 206, p. 147.
62 James Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789.
63 Monckton Jones, *Hastings in Bengal*, pp. 256–57.
64 Hunter, *Annals*, p. 60.
65 Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, p. 217.

11 Revenue farming, 1771–1777

The 1770 famine deepened the economic crisis the Company faced and gave new urgency to the search for more efficient revenue-extraction methods. But the decision to overhaul revenue administration and to take over direct control of collections in the diwani lands had already been made in effect in 1769 when the Company decided to send Supervisors into the districts to investigate each district's resources and draw up rent rolls for a future settlement. Company authorities in London, Calcutta, and Murshidabad had recognized by 1769 that while Company servants were increasing collections in the ceded territories of Burdwan, Chittagong, Midnapur, and the Twenty-four Parganas, the naib nazim's administration in the diwani territories was failing. The experience in Burdwan pointed to the system of the future. The rapid growth of the Burdwan revenues argued that a modified form of farming should be adopted throughout Bengal in which British officers would accept offers for an extended period of years from zamindars or other persons of substance and reliability. British officers would be free to reject bids from persons without security or good character. This was the policy continued in Burdwan in 1771, when Burdwan was farmed out for five years,[1] and in the rest of Bengal in 1772, when the Company "stood forth" as diwan in the diwani lands and entered a five-year contract with ijaradars.

The central feature of the settlements made in Burdwan in 1771 and elsewhere in 1772 was the sale of revenue-collecting rights for a term of five years to the highest qualified bidders, with preference for hereditary zamindars and taluqdars when their offers were at least equal to others. In fact, over half of the 1772 settlement was made with zamindars although many subsequently lost their lands due to arrears.[2] To the degree that the Company continued or restored hereditary landholders as contractors in 1772, it was preserving customary elites.

[1] This chapter discusses revenue farming in Burdwan and elsewhere from 1771 to 1777 while the following two chapters focus on the informal politics of the Burdwan family and zamindari management in the same years.

[2] *Fifth Report, 1812*, Firminger's Introduction, vol. I, p. ccxix

Whether the settlements were made with older landholders or not, the justification for the settlement process was infused with a commercial spirit that was at odds with both traditional local kingship and the way the new system actually functioned. As merchants who were turning their hands to administration, Company servants spoke as if they favored a competitive, capitalist mechanism for maximizing the revenue collections. The rhetoric describing the five-year settlements was phrased in terms of private property, economic development, and individual rights. The Company's stated objective in 1771-72 in offering collection rights to competitive bidding was to use the market to discover the real rental value of the land. Company officials believed that no better avenue existed for learning how much the zamindars, farmers, and other revenue collectors were receiving from the cultivators. They assumed officials and revenue collectors had conspired to embezzle and to keep the Company ignorant of mofussil collections.[3] The Company had tried to ascertain what these collections were by both short-term farming and khas collections in the ceded lands and by sending Supervisors to the diwani lands in 1770 but these experiments had failed to increase the collections or provide the Company with accurate knowledge.

The raiyats were expected to benefit from the new system. Officials believed that the alleged unchecked despotism of nawabi officials and the total dependence of the raiyats on their superiors inhibited individual initiative and industry. Development of a sense of private property would counter the oppressive and economically retarding behavior of social superiors. The Select Committee, in its 1769 instructions to the new Supervisors, said every individual should know what to "call and defend as his own." To help the raiyat know what was his own and what were his rights, written pattas or leases were to be given to each raiyat. Officials were instructed to persuade the raiyat that the pattas were in his self-interest and "that every opposition to them would mean rivetting his own chains, and confirming his servitude and dependence on his oppressors." The pattas would protect the raiyat from the multitude of abwabs and illegal exactions heaped upon him by the zamindars, amils, amla, *darogas*, paiks, etc., and "secure him from all further invasions of his property."[4] The *amilnama* (lease) granted to each ijaradar required him to grant pattas to his raiyats.[5]

Governor Warren Hastings argued that the extended term of five years, in contrast to the annual and triennial farming settlements of the recent past, would lead the revenue collectors to make the necessary encouragements and investments for the expansion of cultivation. And the introduction of Company law

3 Letter to Court, 3 Nov. 1772, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. VI, *1770–1772*, p. 420.
4 Banerjee, *Early Land Revenue System*, pp. 56–63.
5 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 85.

courts would prevent the usurpation of the fruits of the collectors' investments or the cultivators' labor. He thought that the alarming erosion of Bengal's industry and prosperity could be stopped only by checking the arbitrary interference with individual economic enterprise. He imagined that the combined effect of the longer term of the settlements and the creation of Company law courts in each district would be to provide "the security of private property."[6] In the rhetoric of Company officers in the late 1760s and early 1770s, the absence of clear notions of private property blocked Bengal's economic growth.

A close reading of Hastings' language shows that when he wrote of "private property," he used the term loosely. When he wrote of the cultivators' payments to the revenue farmer or zamindar, he called them "rents," and, similarly, he referred to the farmers' payments to government as "rents" (not "taxes"), and to the revenue farmers' agreement with government as a "lease." This language implied that the state owned the land. What, then, did Hastings have in mind when he referred to the need to protect private property? He meant that the raiyat had a private right to keep the profits of his labor, minus the authorized rents to be specified in written agreements, the form of which was prescribed by government. The Company's new district courts were to enforce the pattas and to punish those farmers who fined or demanded rents in excess of those stipulated in the pattas.[7] "Private property" thus meant a contractual share of the land's produce rather than individual ownership of a specific plot on the earth's surface. By this definition, property seems scarcely more private than in pre-Company times.

The declarations about securing individual property rights from the despotic exactions of oppressors sound hollow in view of what happened between 1771 and 1777. The colonial discourse denounced elite Bengali exploitation of the peasantry at the very moment British Company servants were searching for surreptitious ways to supplement their approved emoluments, ultimately at the expense of the peasantry. In the 1770s, some forbidden sources of British income were drying up. The decline in Bengal's internal trade and Company restrictions on private trading activities narrowed commercial opportunities. The reduction of the nazim to a figurehead stemmed the flow of presents from Murshidabad. Company servants assigned to land revenue work compensated by continuing to sell their influence in making the new settlements.

Despite the rhetoric of preventing oppression, the patta regulations under the new, higher settlements gave meagre protection to tenants: for decades the government made few systematic efforts to enforce the regulations and the Company's court system was too rudimentary to give patta-holders protection

[6] Letter to Court, 3 Nov. 1772, p. 421.
[7] Ibid., pp. 420–26.

in any case. The settlements of 1771 and 1772 provided little security of property to revenue farmers, their intermediate collectors, or the raiyats.

While most raiyats did not sign contracts with revenue farmers and their subordinates, the farmers had to sign contracts with government. Yet a sizeable portion of revenue farmers failed to collect as much revenue as they contracted to pay. Company servants naively expected that farmers would not overbid. What they failed to anticipate was that hereditary collectors in some cases would overbid in order to retain their holdings and that outsiders would overbid out of ignorance of the actual capacity of the land or in the expectation that their connections with government employees or the banians of Company servants would enable them to have their arrears forgiven. Nor did Company servants foresee that the artificially high price of grain following the famine had given some bidders a false view of what a lot's normal profits were. Over-production brought the price down in the first years of the farming contract and contributed to the arrears.[8]

The terminology of the five-year settlement plans of 1772 sounded as if the Company was conducting an open market for revenue-collecting rights. The "bids," "auctions," and "competition" were purer than farming in the diwani lands had been in the past but the system was far from open. The Committee of Circuit had a broad discretion in deciding which bids to accept in 1772, as did the Collectors when defaulted lands were subsequently re-farmed. If bids were considered too low, then they were rejected. If bidders offered as securities persons whom the Company servants disliked or distrusted, the bids were refused. Many bidders gave presents to Company servants or their banians to obtain their farms or to receive a reduction in the Company's demand. There is no way to estimate the size of the presents but the practice probably was general. In 1776, Raja Nabakrishna listed payments of Rs. 42 lakhs allegedly received by "the gentlemen from the zamindars, talukdars and farmers" of Bengal between April 1772 and October 1774.[9] If a revenue contractor lacked the resources to meet his obligations, a Company servant often loaned him money. Peter Marshall wrote that "by 1773 Hastings believed that Collectorships had become 'more lucrative than any posts in the service' and heard that collectors made at least a lakh a year on the side (part of which was likely to have been gained by trading as well as from administering the revenue.)"[10] The 1774 arrival of Philip Francis, George Monson, and John Clavering to take their seats on the Governor General's Council, together with tougher sanctions, began to

[8] Extract of letter from Rev. Dept., 18 Oct. 1774, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 899. For a succinct analysis of revenue farming in the 1770s, see B.B. Misra, *The Central Administration of the East India Company, 1773–1834* (Manchester, 1959), pp. 171ff.

[9] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, pp. 97–98.

[10] Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 198.

limit the exaction of presents by Company servants and to check the favoritism displayed to their banians in settlement work. The new Councillors estimated in 1775 "that not less than one-third of the Company's lands in these provinces are, or have lately, been held by the banians of English gentlemen."[11]

The main evidence of what the major zamindars thought of the farming system of the early 1770s was their reluctance to bid. Three factors operated to discourage them from engaging for the revenue. The first was their highly developed sense of hierarchical status. They hesitated to compete in open competition with their former dependents, banians of Company servants, and others of inferior status. Warren Hastings observed that "few men of credit ... to cover their names from the discredit which may attend the rejection of their proposals" bid under their own names.[12] Many zamindars refused to bid at all.

Second, the operation of the 1772 settlement threatened to undermine the self-image of the zamindars as beneficent local rulers. As the auctions proceeded, bidders offered more revenue than many lots had paid to government in the past, despite the depopulated state of those lands. Defaulting farmers faced more certain imprisonment and dispossession than before 1772. This in turn reduced the ability of farmers to be lenient with defaulting tenants. This presented zamindar-farmers with a special dilemma for they liked to think of themselves as more considerate than temporary collectors. Rani Bhawani of Rajshahi put it this way: "I am a zamindar, so was obliged to keep the ryots from ruin and gave what ease to them I could by giving them time to make up their payments."[13]

The third factor which probably deterred zamindars from participating in the bidding were the debts they and their dependent landholders were forced to incur during and after the famine of 1770. With a high and annually rising revenue demand and the prospect of fluctuating income, zamindars needed cash reserves or access to credit in order to farm their lands. Yet the 1760s and the famine not only depleted savings, they also left many zamindars with major debts and diminished access to credit. Although it is impossible to trace zamindar debts to a specific year, by the mid-1770s the rajas of Bishnupur, Birbhum, Burdwan, Cossijura, and Nadia each had major debts. Many of these debts arose out of the conjunction of famine losses and the refusal of the Company to relax its revenue demands in 1770 and 1771.[14] The settlements of 1772 were not only bid high but they also included an annual increment or *rasad*.

The Company's proposed reforms designed to protect the peasantry may also have discouraged zamindars from bidding. These reforms would have abolished

[11] *Fifth Report, 1812*, Firminger's Introduction, vol. I, p. ccxxvii.
[12] Letter to Court, 22 Sept. 1775, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. VII, *1773–1776*, p. 576.
[13] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 74.
[14] Letter to Court, 3 Nov. 1772, p. 419.

the fines and taxes which landholders levied for petty crimes, misdemeanors, and marriages and they would have required landholders to issue written leases specifying what rents tenants would pay.[15] These reforms were rarely implemented but their announcement may have persuaded some zamindars that the Company intended to interfere in areas where they had enjoyed autonomy. Similarly, the inclusion in the five-year contracts of the Company's right to conduct a *hastobud* or village survey and the establishment of district courts under the charge of the Collector to hear civil and criminal suits which, in many cases, zamindars had been deciding, may also have scared some zamindars into abstention from bidding.

If there were strong motives for zamindars not to bid, there were also dangers in having others become farmers. With each year in which zamindari officers had no control, their mofussil knowledge, records, and influence might atrophy. Loss of collection rights also meant suspension of patronage, of beneficence, and much of that authority on which the zamindars' prestige rested. Although the settlements were to be for five years only, there was no guarantee or firm expectation that the zamindars who failed to farm their land could ever recover their territory.

The dilemma of deciding whether to bid or not was thus formidable for the zamindars. For those zamindars who regarded public competition as demeaning, considered the level of settlements too high, or believed government was too intrusive, abstention was a genuine option. What made abstention a viable alternative was the government's provision of moshaira, the maintenance allowance granted to zamindars while their revenue-collecting functions were suspended. In Mughal India, this allowance was usually calculated as 10 percent of the revenue demand[16] but the British used no fixed formula. The raja of Nadia received moshaira of over 20 percent while the average for Bengal and Bihar was 8 percent of the gross jama.[17] In addition, most zamindars were granted farms of small- or medium-sized estates so that their revenue-collecting rights were not totally discontinued. By allowing zamindars moshaira and estates around their residences, the government was partially acceding to the Court of Directors' 1769 injunction not to suddenly "alter the constitution nor deprive the zemindars etc. of their ancient privileges and immunities."[18]

The five-year farming settlement is correctly regarded as a time when banians, merchants, speculators, and outsiders replaced zamindars as collectors of the revenue. Yet the 1772 settlement operations were begun with the hope

[15] Ibid., p. 422.
[16] Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 146.
[17] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, pp. 84 and 105.
[18] Letter to Court, 3 Nov. 1772, p. 424.

that the established taluqdars and zamindars (especially "inferior zamindars") would take the farms. Verelst's testimony from Burdwan and Becher's from the diwani lands argued against settlements with temporary farmers who had no hereditary connection with the land. Warren Hastings, no champion of zamindars, wrote "from a long continuance of the lands in their families, it is to be concluded they have rivetted an authority in the district, acquired an ascendancy over the minds of the ryotts, and ingratiated their affections."[19]

Members of the Committee of Circuit began their tour of the districts in Nadia in June 1772. They invited written bids. However, the bids they received lacked uniformity and comparability and officials quickly resorted, contrary to their original intent, to a public auction.[20] In this, the first public auction of 1772, Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia presented a bid to farm the whole district. The raja's offer was rejected on the stated grounds that the raja had a "subtle and faithless character" and that more revenue could be obtained by breaking the zamindari up into pargana-sized lots. Accordingly, Nadia was settled with new farmers.

The Committee of Circuit next proceeded to Qasimbazar to settle the Rajshahi zamindari, the largest in Bengal. The Committee had a better opinion of Rani Bhawani's "substance, credit and character," and they found the means to avoid bringing the rani into competition with rival bidders in a public auction. They accepted written bids and persuaded the rani to agree to their plan to divide the western section of the zamindari into fourteen under-farms, with the agreements with the under-farmers serving as her collateral security. When bids were invited for the eastern section, no one bid against the rani. Thus Rani Bhawani farmed the whole of her zamindari.[21] By 1774, she had large arrears. She was dispossessed and the zamindari was settled with another farmer.

In Hughli, the bids of small taluqdars and large revenue farmers were accepted. Birbhum, Bishnupur, and most of Midnapur were leased to new farmers, not the zamindars. Most of Burdwan, which will be discussed below, had also been let to farmers in 1771. Thus, the five-year settlements began with Rani Bhawani as the only major zamindar in western Bengal in charge of her zamindari. The other zamindars were provided for, however, by grants of moshaira.

Between 1772 and 1775, many farmers failed to fulfill their agreements with government. Some negotiated reductions or postponements in the revenue demand but most defaulters were dispossessed and their lands were advertised for new bids. When lands were re-let, zamindars were tempted to try to regain their lands. The rajas of Nadia and Bishnupur are examples. After the Nadia farmers defaulted and failed to find new securities whose credit the Collector

[19] Ibid., p. 424. Also Dodwell (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, vol. V. p. 417.
[20] Letter to Court, 3 Nov. 1772, pp. 421–22.
[21] Ibid., pp. 424–25.

considered reliable, Raja Krishnachandra negotiated in 1773 to take over Nadia in the name of his son, Shivachandra.[22] The raja and his son had many debts and they were unable to collect the Nadia revenues to which they had agreed. In May 1777, Philip Francis visited the aged Raja Krishnachandra in "an immense Palace in ruins" and found him "lodged in one Corner of it, in a State of Beggary and Misery, not to be believed."[23] However, Raja Krishnachandra was unsurpassed in Bengal in social status and reputation for patronage of learning, and the Company gradually lowered its demands until 1778, rather than dispossess the family.[24]

Company servants were solicitous of the welfare, although cynical about the managerial capacities, of the most powerful raj families, such as Nadia, Rajshahi, and Burdwan. The collapse and alienation of the largest zamindars might have endangered the revenue collections and possibly led to serious disturbances. The arrest or financial embarrassment of smaller zamindars was of less concern. The ancient zamindari of Bishnupur was an example of a troubled estate that the Company failed to protect. Before the 1760s, Bishnupur resembled a tribute-paying, autonomous chiefdom more than a revenue-paying zamindari. Company efforts to bring its revenue payments up to the standard of zamindari lands began in the late 1760s, while Bishnupur was still under the diwan, with the introduction of both khas management and the "outcry" system. The Bishnupur raj family was poorly prepared to survive the transition. Burdwan's expansion, the Maratha invasions, and the religious absorption of members of the raj family weakened the family. On top of these misfortunes, Raja Damodar Singh engaged from about 1756 in a bitter, debilitating struggle with his first cousin, Raja Chaitanya Singh, to gain control over Bishnupur and recognition as zamindar in succession to their late grandfather, Raja Gopal Singh, whose own two sons were insane. In 1759-60, Damodar seized the zamindari by military force, with the help of Nawab Mir Jafar. Chaitanya fled to Calcutta and argued for years that Bishnupur belonged to him because the Bishnupur rajas traditionally followed rules of primogeniture. Finally in 1765-66 the Sadr Diwani Adalat upheld his claim to undivided possession and Robert Clive sent sepoys to reinstate him as zamindar. But in 1770-71, the Company reversed its decision and split the zamindari between the two cousins.[25]

When Bishnupur was opened to bids in 1772, initially neither the two rajas nor farmers made offers.[26] The Company managed to find farmers four months

22 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 73.
23 Guha, *Rule of Property*, p. 121.
24 James Grant, "Historical and Comparative View," p. 374.
25 Robert Ireland, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 17 May 1798, BOR, Misc., Prog. 17 of 22 May 1798, vol. 260. Also, Abhaya Pada Mallik, *History of Bishnupur-Raj*. pp. 55–59.
26 John Sumner, Bishnupur Col., to COR, 11 July 1772, Comptrolling COR Prog. of 1 Aug. 1772, vol. 3.

into the revenue year but during the next two years these farmers forfeited their ijaras. Company letters from Bishnupur in 1772 and 1773, as from many parts of Bengal, referred repeatedly to the farmers' oppressions, deserting raiyats, raids by dakaits, and farmers' defaults. Finally, in 1774, the defaulting farmers were dispossessed and the rival rajas entered into an agreement with the Company for the remaining three years of the settlement.[27] Bishnupur continued in a disturbed state, with the rajas' private debts and revenue arrears growing and the raj family in a state of genuine poverty.[28] Raja Chaitanya spent most of 1775-76 in jail because of his debts.[29] It seems likely that it was the family rivalry and fear of each other that had induced the cousins to take the farm in 1774 when they would have been wiser to wait for expiration of the five-year settlement.

The Burdwan zamindari emerged from the five-year settlement in a healthier state than Bishnupur. When Burdwan was settled in 1771, a year earlier than the rest of Bengal, the Company farmed most of the zamindari to new contractors, not to the Burdwan raja. Raja Tilakchandra had died in May 1770. His widow, Rani Bishnukumari, was young and not knowledgeable about revenue matters while her son was only a child. In these circumstances, both Company officers and the rani's employees apparently considered it prudent, for different reasons, for the family to relinquish partial control after three years in charge.

In April 1771 the Committee of Revenue ordered Charles Stuart, the Resident of Burdwan, to settle with the same farmers who had held under the Burdwan raj in the preceding three years. Thus, when Stuart and the experienced Company diwan of Burdwan, Bhawani Charan Mitra, leased out the zamindari, they made relatively few changes in the mofussil management. As in other districts farmed the following year, the major Burdwan contractors consisted of the zamindar and his relatives, the Company diwan's relatives, banians of Company servants, local district gentry, and Calcutta magnates. Altogether, Burdwan was leased in roughly eighty lots.[30] Fifteen lots had a jama of over Rs. 1 lakh each and paid over half of Burdwan's revenue. Among the farms taken by residents of Burdwan district, the largest by far belonged to the Burdwan raj family, in the name of various Burdwan ranis, including the widows of Raja Chitrasen (d. 1744) and the mother and widows of Raja Tilakchandra. The family farm was dispersed through the district and had a jama of Rs. 5.43 lakhs. Since this farm

[27] Extract of Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 28 July 1774, BOR Prog. of 2 Aug. 1774, vol. 13, pt. I.
[28] Burdwan PCOR prog. of 15 Dec. 1775, vol. 11.
[29] Burdwan PCOR prog. of 31 May 1776, vol. 14.
[30] The details of the 1771 Burdwan settlement are taken from two sources, the first of which is partially illegible. The first is Statement of the Burdwan Settlement, 1178–1182, BOR Prog. of 16 April 1773, vol. 4, part II. The second is Account Kistbundee of the Burdwan Province, 1180, BOR Prog. of 12 Nov. 1773, vol. 8, pt. I.

was probably under-rated and the young raja, Tejchandra, had a moshaira of Rs. 2.4 lakhs annually, the family was well provided for.

Bhawani Charan Mitra, the Company's diwan in Burdwan who was sometimes referred to as John Graham's banian, was the second largest resident farmer, as well as the most powerful Indian in the district. As Company diwan during and after the 1770 famine, he had succeeded in collecting the government's full demand from the residents of the zamindari. When John Graham joined the Committee of Circuit to settle the diwani territories in 1772, Bhawani Mitra accompanied him and negotiated with revenue farmers on behalf of the Committee, to his own private profit and presumably to Graham's as well.[31] In the following year, Bhawani was reappointed diwan in Burdwan. Although Company regulations forbade its diwans from farming, his sons and dependents took a number of leases in 1771, including pargana Balia, near Calcutta, rated at Rs. 1.8 lakhs, in which his native village of Baksa was located. One of the reasons most Burdwan farms were leased to Burdwan inhabitants may have been that Bhawani Mitra was native to the zamindari and favored local people.

Although most of Burdwan's substantial farmers were natives of the district, roughly a quarter of the jama (Rs. 12.8 lakhs) was farmed to Calcutta residents. This was a substantially smaller proportion than in Birbhum, most of whose farmers lived in Calcutta,[32] in Midnapur, where forty-two of fifty-seven parganas were leased to Krishnakanta Nandi, banian to Warren Hastings, or in Purnia, held by the bankers Hazari Mal and Madan Datta.[33] Calcutta farmers leased a major part of southeastern Burdwan district. Shyam Chatterji farmed the huge salt-producing pargana Mandalghat, with 563 villages in the extreme southeastern corner of the zamindari. Relatives or connections of Sobharam Basak, a wealthy Calcutta merchant, leased Bhursut and two other farms for Rs. 2.6 lakhs.

The single largest farmer in Burdwan was Gokhalchandra Ghosal, a Kulin Brahmin banian from Calcutta. Both the size of his holdings and the special treatment accorded him by the Company illustrate the ascendancy in land management of the men who worked for the Company's servants in both public and private capacities. Gokhal Ghosal had been banian to Harry Verelst when the latter went to Chittagong after it was ceded to the Company in 1760 to make the land revenue settlement. While Gokhal was working on that settlement in his own house in Chittagong, his house burned down and with it all the district's land records.[34] After Verelst was assigned to Burdwan and then made Governor

[31] Extract of Bengal Rev. Consult., 1 April 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 836. Also, examination of Bhawani Charan Mitra, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 26 Oct. 1775, vol. 10.
[32] Alexander Higginson, Birbhum, to COR, 29 March 1774, BOR Prog. of 8 April 1774, vol. 10, pt. II.
[33] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, pp. 70 and 75.
[34] Ramsbotham, *Studies*, pp. 184–85.

in 1765, Gokhal was given important revenue positions, including settlement work in the Twenty-four Parganas. At the same time, he built up a number of commercial enterprises, including money-lending, cloth manufacture and trade, and salt contracting. Some of his business interests were in Burdwan town and in the weaving center of Radhanagar near Chandrakona.

When Verelst had made the 1765 settlement of Burdwan, he could not find anyone to farm some "declining" Burdwan lots. So after six months of receiving no acceptable offers, Verelst turned to Gokhal and offered him an unusual permanent lease for a giant farm which came to be known as taraf Polospoy. Its 1,007 villages were scattered through eighteen parganas mostly to the southeast of Burdwan town, and were assessed at Rs. 4.1 lakhs.[35] Similarly, in 1768, Gokhal was induced to take over the management for three years of two more decaying parganas, Burdwan and Chandrakona, for a jama of almost Rs. 2.5 lakhs.[36] The trade of both Burdwan town and the cotton- and silk-manufacturing area in Chandrakona had been damaged by the wars in north India and by the Company's duties and monopolistic practices after 1757. Pathan and other northern traders who formerly visited Burdwan district to buy salt and textiles had stopped coming and Burdwan's trade with the northwest had dwindled.[37] Gokhal apparently agreed to take on the management of parganas Burdwan and Chandrakona both as a means of pursuing his commercial interests[38] and as a favor to his patrons in the Company service. Company officials granted him the privilege of paying his Burdwan revenues by bills drawn on Calcutta bankers instead of cash to the Burdwan kachari.

By the late 1760s, Gokhal was in substantial arrears although this did not show up in the Burdwan accounts because his balances were recorded separately. In May 1771, his balances had grown to Rs. 7.3 lakhs. But the Company was indulgent because of the decayed state of his farms, his "indefatigable care & attention" in increasing the collections in the Twenty-four Parganas, and the Company's failure to fulfill its Rs. 6 lakh salt contract with him.[39] In the 1771 settlement, the Company intended to let Burdwan and Chandrakona to new farmers but officials could find no other renters so they were re-let to Gokhal

[35] Ghosal later described the lease as "a grant of Indulgence" from Raja Tilakchandra which suggests the raja may have consented to the permanent surrender of part of his zamindari. John Bathoe, Burdwan Col., to COR, 12 July 1773, BOR Prog. of 16 July 1773, vol. 6.

[36] Claud Russell, Col. General, to COR, 15 March 1771, Comptrolling COR Prog. of 30 May 1771, vol. 1. Also, Burdwan PCOR to COR, 11 Aug. 1778, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 11 Aug. 1778, vol. 26.

[37] John Bathoe, Burdwan Col., to COR, 7 Sept. 1773, BOR Prog. of 14 Sept. 1773, vol. 7, pt. I.

[38] Gokhal said he farmed pargana Burdwan "'To retain an influence in the Purgunnah which might' assist him in adjustment of his former mercantile 'Engagements therein.'" John Bathoe, Burdwan Col., to COR, 7 Sept. 1773, BOR Prog. of 14 Sept. 1773, vol. 7, pt. I.

[39] Claud Russell to COR, 15 March 1771.

Ghosal.[40] The reluctance to dispossess Gokhal and perhaps force him into bankruptcy was no doubt related to the extensive financial dealings Company servants had with him: four years after he died, forty-eight Europeans still owed money to his estate.[41] His reputation for generosity may also have protected him. He was said to have daily fed 1,800 persons.[42] Gokhal Ghosal was a typical phenomenon of early Company rule. He accumulated a fortune through his administrative and commercial services to Company employees, entered independent commercial activities of his own, and diversified his investments into land management. In the process, he took his place beside the larger zamindars as a wealthy dispenser of charity and patronage. He not only held Burdwan lands with a higher assessment than the raj family itself, he managed Burdwan pargana around the family's chief residence at the heart of the zamindari.

During the five-year settlement, the Burdwan zamindari officers nominally exercised a certain joint authority with the Company. The young Tejchandra and his officers held an annual puniya attended by the farmers; zamindari courts decided disputes between inhabitants of the district; zamindari seals were used to authenticate the Company's orders to the farmers; zamindari paiks (militia) escorted the farmers' kists (monthly payments) to the Burdwan kachari. In reality, the Burdwan raj family had virtually no formal power outside its own farms because the Company appointed Braja Kishor Roy as zamindari diwan against the will of Rani Bishnukumari and he followed the Company's orders. The rani's steadfast opposition to Braja led the Company in 1772 to deprive her of even symbolic authority by taking from her both her son, Raja Tejchandra, and her zamindari seals. From May 1772 until 1775, the rani lived at Kalna, formally excluded from the district's management and isolated from her son and the zamindari officers.[43]

With Bhawani Mitra as Company diwan and Braja Kishor Roy as zamindari diwan, both their dependents and Company patrons profited. British supervision of Company diwans in this period was loose. When under-tenants complained of unfair or oppressive treatment by the farmers, Bhawani Mitra referred the complaints to the farmers and did not send amins to investigate.[44] Judging from evidence from Hughli, Company diwans rarely gave written orders and were not required to keep their British superiors informed about the use of corporal punishment and imprisonment on small farmers.[45] In Burdwan, Braja Kishor

[40] John Bathoe, Burdwan Col., to COR, 7 Sept. 1773.
[41] Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 44.
[42] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 223.
[43] See the following chapter.
[44] Mathew Dawson's Minute, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 8 Jan. 1776, vol. 12.
[45] Testimony of Peter Moore, former Secretary to Calcutta COR, in *Rada Caunt Gose* v. *Gunga Govind Sing and Iabarry*, Prog. of the Commissioner of Law Suits, 1 Nov. 1778–15 Feb. 1779, pp. 279 and 284–91.

Roy negotiated a contract for Raja Tejchandra to supply over Rs. 1 lakh worth of salt to the Company annually but the actual contractor seems to have been a British Company servant.[46] Bhawani and Braja also diverted many lakhs of rupees from the zamindari treasury to Europeans[47] and in at least one case leased a farm benami (under a false name) to a Company servant.[48] When the Company re-let two farms in arrears, Bhawani leased them to his sons. He also gave to his son over one tenth of the Rs. 3 lakhs in remissions approved by the Company due to a poor harvest in 1773.[49]

During the five-year life of the 1771 settlement, most Burdwan farmers had difficulty fulfilling the terms of their contracts. By the summer of 1773, many farmers were in deep trouble. The government again indulged Gokhal Ghosal and granted temporary remissions of Rs. 3 lakhs to some farmers. But in August 1773, it took away thirteen of the eighty-two Burdwan farms from people in arrears and re-let them at public auction at a loss to the Company of Rs. 4.5 lakhs over the final three years of the settlement.[50] In September 1773, Burdwan was inundated by floods for the third time in two years. Forty-one farmers petitioned the government for an investigation and relief from their revenue obligations. They said that villagers had been forced to find safety on the roofs of their huts and in trees and that in places half the people and cattle had died. They reminded the Company that their motive for holding farms was not necessarily to earn a profit – some made money and some lost money annually – but rather "to Support us in Credit with the World." They concluded "when we reflect on the miserable state of this Country we are bereft of Reason, and our Thoughts are now Expressed amidst the confusion of our minds."[51]

During the final two years of the five-years settlement, the Burdwan farmers stepped up their pleas for help. In February 1776, the Burdwan Council reported that "many" farmers had asked to relinquish their farms, that raiyats, especially in the northern parganas, had deserted, and that the credit of many farmers had been destroyed in March 1775 when the Company dismissed Braja Kishor Roy, the zamindari diwan. Braja had been security for four large farms as well as for a number of smaller ones. The Burdwan Council summoned farmers in arrears and warned them it would use "the most rigid severity" to collect the arrears.[52] Most farmers faced higher obligations in the last two years because of earlier

[46] Examination of Bhawani Charan Mitra, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 26 Oct. 1775, vol. 10.
[47] Extract of Rev. Consult., 10 March 1775. Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, pp. 746–47 and 763.
[48] Mr. Fleetwood held Shergarh benami. Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 19 July 1775, vol. 9.
[49] Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 26 Oct. 1775, vol. 10.
[50] John Bathoe, Burdwan Col., to COR, 1 and 22 Aug. 1773, BOR Progs. of 6 and 24 Aug. 1773, vol. 7, pt. I.
[51] Petition from Burdwan farmers, BOR Prog. of 10 Dec. 1773, vol. 8, pt. II.
[52] Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 6 Feb. 1776, vol. 6.

temporary remissions, the annual increments built into the original 1771 settlement, and the advances the Company made for taqavi (government loans for cultivation) and *pulbandi* (repair of river embankments). The government had authorized loans of Rs. 4.4 lakhs to farmers, mostly in the southeastern sections of the zamindari, for restoring the embankments after they were damaged by the floods.[53] Traditionally, the Burdwan zamindar, not the under-renters, had been responsible for such repairs[54] and the farmers were either unable or unwilling to pay back these advances.

Company officials responded to the farmers' pleas of over-assessment and insolvency with a new rigor. They tightened control over their Indian subordinates and sent amins into the mofussil to investigate both the raiyats' complaints of oppression against the farmers and the farmers' misappropriation of the pulbandi advances.[55] By March 1776, just before the five-year settlement was to expire, thirty of Burdwan's farms were in arrears and at least ten farmers were confined.[56] Because the Company had decided to return the management of Burdwan to the zamindar, it no longer was willing to listen to excuses or requests for remissions from the lease-holders.

The five-year settlements in Burdwan and in the rest of Bengal failed to fulfill the Company's revenue expectations. The Company had expected an annual increase in land revenue because the 1772 settlement agreements included progressive increases in the demand. However, as farmers defaulted and as the Company resettled the land with new farmers, it lowered the demand where it considered the demand excessive so that the demand actually declined in each of the last three years of the settlement. Even so, collections fell substantially short of the revised demand.[57] Altogether, by 1780, the Company had collected Rs. 13.58 krors, or almost 88 percent of the original gross five-year settlement of Rs. 15.44 krors.[58]

The five-year experiment also failed to secure property rights. Few village-level people received pattas or were protected by the new civil courts. Nor did the "outcry" system develop a free market for land as Company servants had anticipated. The market for revenue farms showed little elasticity because there were few people with the financial credit, local authority, and local knowledge available to bid for the land. As the 1771-77 experience indicated, the government's demand was so high that farmers had little profit margin with which to

53 Account Poolbundy for Burdwan, 1772–73 to 1775–76, App. to Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 5 Aug. 1776, vol. 16.
54 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 14.
55 Mathew Dawson's remarks, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 8 Jan. 1776. vol. 12.
56 List of Burdwan farmers' arrears, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 12 March 1776, vol. 13.
57 Abstract of Remissions and Balances, 18 July 1777, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, pp. 864–65.
58 Abstract, 28 Nov. 1780, ibid., pp. 868–69.

absorb consecutive seasonal misfortunes. Moreover, the "outcry" system was far from free as British and Indian Company employees often granted leases to land for political and personal motives. A sizeable fraction of Bengali farmers obtained their leases through bribes and presents to Company employees and their banians. While many received favorable terms through these payments, the cost of bribes and presents cut into profit margins. John Graham, who probably made more money in Burdwan than any other civil servant, had a fortune worth an estimated £ 95,000 or Rs. 9.5 lakhs when he left India in 1774.[59] His successor at Burdwan, Charles Stuart, also received sizeable "presents."[60] Rani Bishnukumari accused the Company-appointed zamindari officers of making illicit payments of over Rs. 3 lakhs to other British officials.[61] The British practices of taking bribes or presents, permitting their banians to lease farms, and lending money to zamindars were almost universal in this period.[62] The financial failures of the farming system and the arrival of new members of the Governor's Council meant that in 1777 the Company would turn to the zamindars to collect the revenue.

59 Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 244.
60 Ibid., p. 195.
61 John Smith's report, 10 Dec. 1776, Ninth Report on Justice, 1783, App. IIIA, p. 382.
62 Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, pp. 190ff.

12 Zamindari family politics: the Burdwan raj, 1770–1775

The death of Raja Tilakchandra in May 1770 left the Burdwan raj family without an authoritative leader, without a person commanding respect from both major factions within the Burdwan raj who was capable of protecting the family's assets and settling the family's internal disputes. That the bulk of the zamindari was farmed out to ijaradars from 1771 to 1776 may have minimized the damage that the zamindari amla could inflict during the period when the inexperienced young widow, Rani Bishnukumari, was titular head of the family. Yet from 1770 until her death in 1798, controversies swirled around her, one drama followed another. These controversies afford a view into common problems of zamindari family politics in Bengal. This and the following chapter trace the disputes, largely unconnected to revenue matters, that deeply disrupted the lives of Rani Bishnukumari and her young son, Raja Tejchandra.

From the beginning of British administration in Bengal, Company officials tended to act as if zamindars were public servants rather than hereditary lords of privately owned land. If more efficient agents of revenue collection could be found, the zamindars were set aside on handsome stipends. Yet officials recognized that zamindars possessed a genuine authority over the people of their territories as well as hereditary privileges. So even when revenue farmers and other temporary agents were vested with collection rights, the Company employed zamindari officers, zamindari seals and signatures, and the zamindari puniya ceremonies to buttress the Company's authority. When a zamindar died, the Company assisted his successor in gaining a sanad from the Mughal emperor confirming his titles. The Company implicitly recognized that zamindars were something more than public servants who sometimes collected revenue. Zamindars possessed status, privileges, and immunities quite independent of whether they controlled the collections.

Because zamindars embodied useful authority, received stipends from the public revenues, and might be employed in future collection duties, the Company felt justified in interfering in the internal family affairs of the larger zamindars. If officials believed that the heir to a zamindari was not receiving a proper education or that a zamindar's stipend and other income were being embezzled by zamindari officers, the Company sometimes intervened. Similarly,

if a succession was disputed, the Company moved to settle the conflict when it threatened the public revenues. However, decisions to interfere in the internal management or family disputes of major zamindars were usually influenced by considerations unconnected to the security of public resources. Fortunes were at stake in the decisions about which member of a family should receive charge of zamindari treasuries and patronage. Zamindari family members and employees were willing to pay to shape Company decisions. And Company employees were willing to receive "presents" for exercising their influence.

Factions within zamindari families offered avenues of opportunity for both Company servants and zamindari amla. Factions were likely to form when new people entered a raj family. Adoption of a male heir was one way outsiders were brought into some families. Many marriages failed to produce children, making adoption necessary. Multiple marriages were even more common. Zamindars took new brides to increase the likelihood of the birth of a male heir, to incorporate new allies, or to obtain younger sexual partners. Probably no older rani welcomed a new rival for her raja's affection, not least of all because the younger rani brought a fresh set of relatives into the extended family to compete for zamindari lands, patronage, and other resources. When a young rani produced an heir after the older ones had failed, the sense of displacement was even greater. Younger ranis usually outlived their husbands. When a widowed rani was the mother of the designated heir, typically she experienced conflicting pressures from zamindari amla who hoped to ingratiate themselves with the young raja and from Company servants who sought to provide for his education to manage the public revenues. A widowed rani so placed, restricted in her social contacts and perhaps isolated from her natal family, sometimes reacted by trying to keep her son close to her, by impeding his associations and education. And when she was also placed in charge of the zamindari during her son's minority, she found that her lack of managerial experience and enforced seclusion inhibited her ability to prevent the chief zamindari officers from making collusive rental arrangements or embezzling the zamindari's income. Altogether, the minority of father-less zamindari heirs was a precarious time for raj families.

During the 1770s and 1780s, Company officials developed an aversion to permitting widowed ranis to manage zamindaris for their minor sons. District officials expected to advise and converse with zamindars, but claimed that the seclusion of high-status women impaired their supervision. Henry Vansittart and Edward Baber, in their combined thirty-two years in Bengal, said they had never seen "the Wife, or Women, of any Man of Rank." James Rennell, in his thirteen years of residence, saw only one – on the way to burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Rennell illustrated the depth of Bengali feeling about female seclusion with two anecdotes. In the first, a government officer trying to measure a Hindu's house "broke open the Door of the Zenana or Women's

Apartment, upon which the Master of the House immediately destroyed himself by cutting his Throat." In the other, a Hindu's house caught fire. "The Master of the House, rather than expose the Women to the View of the Multitude, thrust them into an inner Apartment, and was there burnt to Death with them."[1]

John Shore suggested in 1789 that female zamindars should not be permitted to manage revenue collections. Many Company servants would have agreed with his reasons. He argued that women in Bengal were "secluded" from the company of unrelated males other than family priests, they were not educated in zamindari management, and therefore they became "passive instruments in the hands of their servants" who in many cases subverted the zamindari's and Company's interests. Since Company servants could not converse with ranis, except on rare occasions through a parda or curtain, they had few means of learning about their capacity for administration or even if the ranis received Company communications or were the source of orders issued in their names.[2]

These negative opinions about the capacity of female zamindars were shaped by the Company's experience with widowed ranis in Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Birbhum, and Burdwan. The Rajshahi, Dinajpur, and Birbhum cases deserve brief discussion, before coming to the more famous and complex saga of the rani of Burdwan.

The Rajshahi case, like the Burdwan one, exemplified the tendency of zamindari factions to exploit the political divisions in the capital. A change in the composition of the Governor General's Council in both cases shifted zamindari management from one faction to another, and with that shift major resources were exchanged.

Rajshahi (Nator) was geographically the largest zamindari in Bengal. When the Company took over the administration of Rajshahi in 1772, the zamindar was Rani Bhawani whose husband had died in 1748, fifty-eight years before her death. In the 1772 settlement, Rani Bhawani took the zamindari in farm and informed the Company she wanted her own adopted son and zamindari manager, Ramakrishna, to succeed her.[3] Another branch of the family favored the claims of Gauriprasad to succeed. Company officials came to doubt Rani Bhawani's ability to control zamindari affairs during her management from 1772 to 1774. Edward Baber, who was on the Murshidabad Provincial Council of Revenue which supervised Rajshahi, did not even see her place of residence and believed that she had virtually no role in the zamindari's "public business" and "never appeared in public."[4] When she fell into arrears in 1774, Warren

[1] Report on Petitions, 1781, pp. 38–39.
[2] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, paras. 321–27.
[3] P.J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (London, 1965), p. 143.
[4] Testimony of Edward Baber, Report on Petitions, 1781, p. 33.

Hastings and the Calcutta Council transferred the collections to a new revenue farmer and "expressly excluded" Ramakrishna from succeeding his adoptive mother. However, after Philip Francis and the new Councillors arrived in October 1774, Ramakrishna petitioned the Council, claiming that Warren Hastings' banian, Kantu Babu, and other servants of Company employees had embezzled over Rs. 15 lakhs from the zamindari. The new majority on the Council then returned the zamindari to Rani Bhawani and recognized Ramakrishna's right to succeed.[5] The subsequent "decline of the revenues" and "confusion" in Rajshahi's affairs were attributed to the rani's incompetence.[6]

The Dinajpur example did not involve factions on the Calcutta Council, but like Rajshahi and Burdwan, the period of a rani's management brought severe conflict within the zamindari and between the widowed rani and the Company's government. Raja Baidhanath of Dinajpur died in 1780 without a male heir. His widow, Rani Saraswati, adopted a three-year-old, Radhanath, whom the Company recognized as successor to the zamindari. In 1781, the Committee of Revenue tried to arrange for Raja Radhanath's education but the rani refused to permit him to leave her apartments and for some years allegedly restricted efforts to prepare him to manage the estate.[7] The rani's brother managed the zamindari until the Company dismissed him for arrears in 1786. He died in 1790 in Calcutta where he was imprisoned for debt. The governor appointed as new diwan and as guardian to the young raja a relative of Radhanath's named Ramkant Roy. In 1790, Rani Saraswati, who was no longer consulted on zamindari affairs or permitted to look after her son, kidnapped Raja Radhanath and hid him in her apartments. The Company seized the young raja and exiled the rani from the zamindari headquarters. In 1792, Raja Radhanath, aged fifteen, was given formal charge of the zamindari, with Ramkant Roy still serving as diwan. In 1793, the raja charged Ramkant with "large scale embezzlement." The government blocked an official investigation, forbade the raja to dismiss his zamindari servants, and in 1794 put the estate under the new Court of Wards on the grounds of the raja's managerial "incapacity." Raja Radhanath was restored in 1795 but by 1799 all but a minute piece of the zamindari had been sold for arrears. Ramkant Roy and other former amla were the major purchasers.[8]

No zamindari was damaged more by succession problems and unfaithful amla than Birbhum. At the time that Raja Asad-ul-Zaman died in 1778, the raja was at odds with Rani Kaniz Fatima, his principal wife, and was living with a

[5] Marshall, *Impeachment*, p. 144.

[6] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 325.

[7] Ibid., para. 348.

[8] Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, pp. 93–118. Actually Raja Radhanath's wife repurchased about 10 per cent of the estate. Ibid., pp. 117–18.

mistress. The widowed rani claimed the zamindari but the Company granted it, following Islamic law and in the absence of male children, to Bahadur Zaman Khan, a half-brother of Asad-ul-Zaman and son of a slave belonging to Asad's mother. Bahadur Zaman Khan, according to the Board of Revenue, was "of an indolent disposition, and much addicted to dissolute habits, but allowed his officers to plunder the country uncontrolled."[9] In the early 1780s, large arrears occurred. In 1786, the Company suspended Bahadur and for two years made a settlement with revenue farmers. The district was severely disturbed for the balance of the decade due to the irregular settlements and preferential leases which the zamindari amla had made with the mandals and other principal raiyats. In contrast with Burdwan, the Birbhum raj family lacked a strong intermediate gentry class supportive of its interest and capable of controlling the rebellious mandals. Violent peasant combinations, murders, gang robberies, and tribal raids from the western hills were common.[10]

Bahadur Zaman died in 1788 and left seven minor sons by different women.[11] The family was deeply divided between adherents of Rani Kaniz Fatima, who still aspired to obtain the zamindari, and of Bahadur Zaman Khan. In 1789, Bahadur's widow claimed that in the absence of an effective family leader, women in the *zenanna* were sneaking out through openings cut by the slaves to "form improper connections" and intrigue against her.[12] The Birbhum raj family entered the Decennial Settlement with a divided family and a decayed estate and were in no condition to reform the mofussil settlement so that they could pay the inflexible demand of the 1790s. By 1801, the illiterate, drunken raja, Muhammad Zaman Khan, retained a single pargana, Deogarh, with a jama of Rs. 15,172,[13] and was reduced to begging and borrowing "from the meanest people of the district."[14]

The Burdwan zamindari was also buffeted by family divisions, amla factionalism, and dissension between major Company servants. When Maharaja Tilakchandra died of a fever in May 1770, he was survived by two young widows, the first of whom, Maharani Bishnukumari, was mother to his designated heir, five-year-old Tejchandra. The second widow, Rupkumari, had no children. Bishnukumari, who was to outlive her husband by almost three decades, had a brother, Bakhtar Singh who lived in Burdwan and sometimes took revenue assignments. However, he seems to have been distant from her,

[9] Board of Revenue remarks, BOR Prog. 60A of 7 June 1786, vol. 1 Also, petition of widow of Asad-ul-Zaman, ibid.

[10] Durgadas Majumdar, *WDBG: Birbhum*, pp. 113–15. Also, Gupta, *Economic Life*, pp. 43ff.

[11] Petition of Muhammad Shuja-ul-Zaman Khan, BOR Prog. 96 of 31 March 1789, vol. 63.

[12] Enclosure to Christopher Keating, Birbhum Col., to BOR 16 Nov. 1789, BOR Prog. 9 of 3 Dec. 1789, vol. 82.

[13] Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, p. 130.

[14] BOR Prog. of 3 July 1801, vol. 336.

and her son seems to have been her only other close relative in the district.[15] As mother to the young raja, she aspired to manage the zamindari or at least to choose the zamindari officers. Of particular concern was the control of the household treasury into which the Company paid Tejchandra's annual stipend of Rs. 2.4 lakhs while Burdwan was leased to ijaradars from 1771 to 1776. Also of concern was the preservation of a large, profitable, scattered estate within the zamindari. Known as the Amboa Dewry Mahals,[16] it had been given at little or no rent by the Burdwan zamindars, although it was assessed by government, to the widows of the Burdwan rajas for their maintenance and religious observances. Traditionally, it was held by the most senior rani. In 1770, when Raja Tilakchandra died, that rani was Tilakchandra's aged mother. However, Rani Bishnukumari expected to obtain the management of the Dewry Mahals upon the *boro* rani's death. Until then, she was dependent upon her son's allowance and rental income and upon the men who managed the zamindari during Tejchandra's minority.

Upon her husband's death in 1770, Rani Bishnukumari proposed to demand the customary extra cess from the peasants to pay for Tilakchandra's shraddha or funeral ceremonies but the Resident, John Graham, denied her permission to do so. Company policy prohibited the levy of irregular taxes or imposts. Instead, Graham personally loaned her money at a rate of interest that was moderate by current standards.[17]

The Company sent condolences to young Tejchandra, invited him to prepare an *arzi* or petition for the Company to forward to the Mughal emperor, requesting a sanad in recognition of Tejchandra's inheritance of his father's titles, and ordered John Graham to bestow a khilat or a robe of honor and an elephant on Tejchandra in honor of his succession.[18] In May 1771, when Tejchandra received his father's titles from the emperor and the nawab of Bengal, the Company gave the young raja an additional ceremonial dress, a string of pearls, a sword worth Rs. 8,850, and an elephant. It conferred smaller presents on the zamindari diwan and mutasaddis.[19]

Rani Bishnukumari was pleased by the British and Mughal recognition of her son's inheritance but she also wanted control of the raja's household treasury

15 In 1774, she said Tejchandra was her only relation "with me." Rani's petition, BOR Prog. of 30 Dec. 1774, vol. 14.

16 "Amboa" was Ambika-Kalna, the estate's headquarters and the old rani's residence on the Bhagirathi river. "Dewry" most likely was the British spelling of the Hindi word *dohri* which means "service land, or lands granted rent-free by Zamindars to village servants, to poor relatives, or religious mendicants." Wilson, *Glossary*, p. 146.

17 Rani's letter to GG, extract of Rev. Consult., 1 March 1775, and J. Graham to GG, extract of Rev. Consult., 6 Jan. 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, pp. 738 and 744.

18 Prog. of 16 June 1770, Home Misc., vol. 201, p. 55.

19 Burdwan COR Prog. of 25 June 1771, ibid.

and the symbolic functions of the zamindari while most of its lands were farmed out to ijaradars. The Company, on the other hand, had appointed its diwan, Braja Kishor Roy, to manage in her place. She therefore petitioned the Company to appoint one of her late husband's relatives as diwan. She described Braja as "my Enemy" and said it would be difficult to preserve her "honor and credit in the Eyes of the Public and to reside at Burdwan in the circle of my Enemies."[20] The Company refused.

The right of the rani to select her own diwan, manage the household treasury, and keep custody of her son, Tejchandra, became the subject of parliamentary investigation and a source of major dispute, not only between the rani and the Company but later between Warren Hastings and Philip Francis as well. Rani Bishnukumari claimed in 1774 that before he died, Raja Tilakchandra had appointed a Punjabi relative and former diwan, Lala Amirchandra, as "sole administrator of his affairs and guardian to his son."[21] However, the Company instead chose Braja Kishor Roy as zamindari diwan. Braja came from a family with two generations of revenue experience under the Burdwan raj. His father, Ratni Sur, had been shiqdar (revenue collector) of his family's native pargana of Bali, near Hughli. Braja had succeeded his elder brother as a naib (assistant) to zamindari Diwan Amirchandra and then from 1768 to 1770 was acting diwan under Amirchandra.[22] Braja won the respect of a series of Company officials in Burdwan in the late 1760s and early 1770s. Perhaps it was because of this that after Tilakchandra's death in 1770, Rani Bishnukumari sent him to Calcutta to obtain the Company's recognition of Tejchandra as the new zamindar. Braja took Rs. 84,500 worth of the raj family's gold, jewels, and other valuables to cover his expenses and to give presents to British "gentlemen."[23] He returned to Burdwan with the diwanship. He was given much of the credit for the collection without arrears of the revenues payable at Burdwan in 1770-71, despite the great losses of the famine.[24] Apart from his willingness to give presents to his Company patrons[25] and his skills as an administrator, the Company may have favored him because he was unrelated to the Burdwan family and thus was detachable from the family's interest.

[20] Rani's petition received 16 August 1771, Home Misc., vol. 203.

[21] John Graham, Resident at Burdwan in 1770, in denying the rani's charges, claimed that Raja Tilakchandra distrusted Lala Amirchandra and had dismissed him from office. J. Graham to GG, 6 Jan. 1775. Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 738.

[22] Rani's petition, extract of Rev. Consult., 7 March 1775, ibid., p. 745.

[23] Rani's petition, BOR Prog. of 30 Dec. 1774, vol. 14.

[24] Charles Stuart, Burdwan Resident, to COR, 12 April 1771, Comptrolling COR Prog. of 23 April 1771, vol. 1.

[25] A list of his presents before and after Tilakchandra's death appears in Abstract of accounts prepared from Braja Kishor's papers, extract of Rev. Consult., 10 March 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 750.

On the other hand, Braja gave little satisfaction to Rani Bishnukumari. In the summer of 1771, she complained to the Governor and Council that Braja was disrespectful to her and her son, that he refused to inform her of zamindari affairs, and that he was embezzling the young raja's allowance and revenues "whereby the Servants, Elephants, Horses are reduced to a starving Condition."[26] In September 1771, she complained again, stating that at the puniya Braja had "distributed Kelats to Servants and no Servants or to whoever he pleased and is settling several Districts at an under value."[27] The Governor ordered Braja to Calcutta for a hearing, after which he was reconfirmed as zamindari diwan.[28]

From 1768 through 1774, Braja wielded immense influence in Burdwan in his consecutive positions as acting zamindari diwan, Company diwan, and *khansamani* (household) diwan. Company servants consulted him about the reliability of prospective ijaradars and the proper levels of their assessments. Moreover, he received and disbursed sizeable sums of money while he supervised the zamindari treasury. Judging from an abstract of his own incomplete accounts, almost Rs. 30 lakhs passed through his hands. Of this amount, Rs. 16.1 lakhs was the Company's annual allowance to Raja Tejchandra while the zamindari was leased to revenue farmers.[29] Rani Bishnukumari thought that she, not Braja, should administer those funds.

The Company not only refused the rani's request for control of the household treasury, in May 1772 the Council at Burdwan also decided to separate Tejchandra from his mother and entrust his care and education to Braja and a teacher named Ramkant Roy.[30] To deprive a mother of the care and companionship of her seven-year-old son may seem an extraordinary act but it was consistent with the tendency to treat zamindars as public servants whose semi-governmental functions and obligations overrode their personal rights. The Burdwan Council seems to have been motivated by several concerns. It wished to provide Tejchandra with a sound education and apparently believed Bishnukumari's obstructionist attitudes were interfering with his development. It suspected that the rani had engaged in sexually scandalous behavior and perhaps it concluded that she had thereby forfeited her right to raise her son. And the Council hoped "to discourage all the factions and cabals that have so long disturbed the {Burdwan] province and the Rajah's

26 Press List, COR Separate Prog., 2 July 1771.
27 Prog. of 4 Sept. 1771, Home Misc., vol. 203, p. 105.
28 Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 733.
29 Abstract of Braja's accounts, extract of Rev. Consult., 10 March 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 750.
30 This Ramkant Roy, who died in 1773, should not be confused with Ramkant Roy who became Bishnukumari's manager and supposed lover in subsequent years.

house."[31] What the Council did not say was that by shutting the rani and ex-diwan Amirchandra, who was acting as her vakil, out of the family's management, Braja would be better able to continue his payments from the family treasury to various Company servants.[32]

The rani was distraught because of the loss of her son. When she later pressed her case to the anti-Hastings majority on the Calcutta Council in 1774, she claimed that not only had the Resident, Charles Stuart, taken her son but that he also denied her food for a week to force her to surrender the raja's seals which were used to signify the authenticity of zamindari documents and orders.[33]

Braja's victory over the rani and Lala Amirchand seemed complete in May 1772. He had control over the raja and the Burdwan raj treasury, which now received a monthly stipend for the raja of Rs. 16,000. The rani was assigned the remaining Rs. 4,000. Warren Hastings claimed that the rani kept up her efforts to recover her son and to have Braja dismissed, offering "many" lakhs, but to no avail.[34]

With the arrival of Philip Francis, General John Clavering, and Colonel George Monson in October 1774, the rani had a majority on the Governor General's Council willing to give a sympathetic hearing to her charges against Braja and Company servants. In December 1774, she sent a letter to the Council charging that Braja had been appointed against her will, that he had embezzled jewels, gold, and money from the household treasury, and that Charles Stuart and John Graham, the former Collector and a friend of Hastings, had taken her son from her. She also wrote she suspected that her and her son's lives might now be in danger from Braja, much as Jagat Rai's had been in 1702 when he was murdered by a zamindari employee. She asked permission for Tejchandra and her to come to Calcutta for their safety. She also repeated her request to have Braja dismissed.[35]

Hastings and Barwell opposed the rani's requests to visit Calcutta and replace Braja, on the grounds that the reversal of prior decisions, which had been discussed at length, might excite factions and interfere with the revenue collections. They also opposed the rani's recommendation that Lala Koshalchandra and Rupnarayan Chaudhuri be appointed diwan and peshkar (head clerk), respectively. Barwell charged that Koshalchandra was "a secret agent in promoting [the rani's] forbidden pleasures" and that Rupnarayan was "a man of

[31] Extract of Charles Stuart, Burdwan Resident, to Warren Hastings, 25 May 1772, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 799.

[32] These payments are discussed below.

[33] Rani's petitions, extracts of Rev. Consult., 30 Dec. 1774 and 14 Jan. 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, pp. 733–34 and 741.

[34] Extract of Warren Hastings' letter to Court, 25 March 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 799.

[35] Rani of Burdwan's letter to Warren Hastings and Council, 27 Dec. 1774. Extract of Rev. Consult., 30 Dec. 1774, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, pp. 733–34.

infamous character." The majority, however, granted the rani's request to visit Calcutta. They held that subjects of British government ought to enjoy a right to travel and present complaints.[36] They later castigated Barwell for his "gross insinuation" about the rani's sexual behavior and added "we leave it to the mercenary auxiliaries of [Siraj-ud-daula] to ruin individuals, to burn villages, and violate the sacred retirements of the Zenanah."[37]

While in Calcutta, the rani and her son stayed in their Calcutta house. The Calcutta Council asked the rani to prove her charges against Braja and John Graham and they summoned Braja to Calcutta. In drawing up a list of embezzlements of which she accused Braja and Graham, the rani used accounts supplied to her by Braja on the Council's orders. The Council sent Alexander Elliot, Superintendent of the Khalsa or treasury office, to interview the rani in her inner apartments about the list of alleged embezzlements she submitted. Elliot and the rani were separated by a curtain, while a *munshi* (interpreter) read the Persian accounts to the rani, who did not read Persian[38] and was asked to confirm that the charges were her own.

The accounts submitted by the rani stated that Braja had dispersed Rs. 9.36 lakhs from the zamindari household treasury to twelve Europeans, including Warren Hastings, and their banians under the denomination of "durbar expenses." John Graham and his successor at Burdwan, Charles Stuart, with their banians were shown to have received Rs. 6.4 lakhs while the "Gentlemen of the Council" in Calcutta received Rs. 1.5 lakhs.[39] Since Braja's own accounts confirmed many of the disbursements alleged by the rani, there is little reason to doubt that Braja participated in sizeable embezzlements. In what proportions Braja and Company servants with their banians benefited was a different matter which could not be proved because receipts were not produced and few Company employees were questioned.[40] Stuart had already left India and Graham was permitted to leave after the allegations were made but before the Council's discussion of embezzlements began.

What might Braja have obtained in return for the payments he said he made to Graham, Stuart, and other high-placed Company servants, apart from the continuation of his own appointment as the chief Indian officer in the district? Braja described some of the payments as "the custom of the country." Thus, when John Graham arrived in Burdwan as Resident, Braja said he asked his assistant to pay Graham Rs. 15,000 "as a compliment." This would have shown

36 Extract of Rev. Consult., 30 Dec. 1774, ibid., p. 734–35.
37 Extract of Minute by Clavering, Monson, and Francis, 11 Jan. 1775, ibid., p. 797.
38 Extract of Rev. Consult., 11 March 1775, ibid., pp. 751–52.
39 John Smith's Report of 10 Dec. 1776, Ninth Report on Justice, 1783, p. 382.
40 The total of the embezzlements charged to Braja exceeded Rs. 11 lakhs. The details appear in Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, pp. 762–93.

his good will towards and respect for Graham in a manner that was virtually universal in Bengal in the early 1770s. Braja also alleged that British officials demanded payments upon the raja's succession and in order to prevent a reduction in the raja's stipend.[41] He may also have paid to obtain adjustments of government's revenue demands and to secure ijaradar leases for his dependents.

In any case, in 1775 Rani Bishnukumari triumphed. The anti-Hastings majority on the Calcutta Council agreed to restore Raja Tejchandra to his mother and to approve the rani's choice of her zamindari officers. The rani may have secured her victory with presents. George Vansittart informed Hastings that the rani had agreed to pay Rs. 2 lakhs to Francis, Clavering, and Monson and another Rs. 65,000 to Joseph Fowke, Nandakumar, and Radhacharan Roy (Nandakumar's son-in-law).[42] The majority also voted to honor the rani, the raja, and their officers. The raja appeared before the Board of Revenue at Fort William and received robes, jewels, and an elephant. The Secretary of the Board went to the rani's Calcutta house and presented her and Tejchandra with khilats and an elephant and gave lesser presents to her officers. This was a demonstration that Lala Koshalchandra and Rupnarayan Chaudhuri, as diwan and naib diwan, respectively, were superseding Braja and taking charge of the raja's education.[43] Warren Hastings opposed the majority's decision to conduct these ceremonies, saying that he would not help the majority celebrate "a Triumph over myself."[44] The decision came four days after Nandakumar charged Hastings before the Council with receiving a large bribe from Munni Begum, widow of Nazim Mir Jafar. Hastings claimed that the rani of Burdwan and Rupnarayan Chaudhuri were "instruments" in the majority's continuing efforts to discredit him.[45] Rupnarayan soon after testified in favor of Nandakumar in the latter's forgery trial. But that was not the only qualification that might have recommended him to the anti-Hastings majority. Rupnarayan was the son of Rajaram Chaudhuri of Baksa (now in Hughli district) who had been diwan of the Burdwan raj earlier in the century. Rupnarayan also had held high office under the raj and defeated a Maratha contingent in Mandalghat pargana.[46] When the wealthy Calcutta banians, Hazari Mal and Madan Datta, farmed Purnia in 1772, Rupnarayan and another man acted as their agents.[47] He was an able, experienced revenue manager. Nevertheless, it was clear that the majority and the

41 Smith's Report, p. 382.

42 Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Life and Times of Cantoo Baboo (Krisna Kanta Nandy), The Banian of Warren Hastings*, vol. II (Calcutta, 1981), p. 38.

43 Extract of Rev. Consult., 17 March 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 760.

44 COR Prog. of 14 March 1775, Bengal Rev. Consult., P/49/51.

45 Extract of Secret Consult., 13 March 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 702.

46 A.K. Banerji, *WBDG: Hooghly*, p. 697.

47 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 75.

minority on the Governor General's Council were using Burdwan factions to fight their feuds.

Rani Bishnukumari was in easier circumstances, now that officers of her own selection managed the family's affairs and now that she controlled her son's allowance from the Company. Her fortunes were improving in other ways. Revenue farming was discredited. Sentiment among Company servants was swinging towards a zamindari settlement on the expiration of the five-year leases. With Philip Francis and the majority sympathetic to her family and to zamindars in general, the rani and her managers must have known that they were likely to recover the zamindari when the Burdwan leases were to expire in April 1776. The rani gratefully wrote to Hastings and the Council that their favor

> to me and my family will ... be fully repaid to the Company in the Revenues ... the antiquity of my house will always operate to the Company's advantage, by the influence it will have in establishing that authority over the Ryotts necessary in the collections, and in securing that obedience which will be cheerfully yielded to a family who has so many years presided over them.[48]

[48] Rani to GG, 11 March 1775, extract of Rev. Consult., 11 March 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 751.

13 The politics of Burdwan family debt and marriages, 1775–1778

Rani Bishnukumari's triumph over Braja, Warren Hastings, and her other enemies in 1775 must have warmed her heart. The quasi-public reunion with her son in the Company's own capital and her installation as head of the family's affairs had to be especially gratifying. By bringing the Burdwan presents to Company servants to the attention of the Council majority, the Court of Directors, and ultimately Parliament, she had reduced the likelihood that she and other zamindars would be squeezed in the future. The prospects for her and the zamindars seemed to be improving in other ways. Sentiment among both the majority and the minority on the Governor General's Council was moving away from short-term settlements with revenue farmers towards settlements of long duration with zamindars. In April 1775, Warren Hastings and Richard Barwell proposed that settlements should be made for one or two life-times. The following January, Philip Francis advocated a permanent settlement.[1] Some Company servants also favored a reduction in the revenue demand in depopulated districts.

Nevertheless, formidable dangers for the rani lay ahead. Those dangers came from Calcutta as well as from within the Burdwan zamindari. In 1776, the Court of Directors refused "at present" to approve of life-time or perpetual leases, except for the raja of Dinajpur who was to be given a life tenure as an experiment.[2] The remainder of Bengal's landholders received one-, two-, or three-year settlements through the following decade. Company officials were uncertain about the amounts at which to fix revenue settlements. As part of the effort to gather more information, the Governor General and Council appointed the Amini Commission to investigate revenue administration in the districts.[3] Until they accumulated more data, they continued to make short-term settlements.

[1] Ramsbotham, *Studies*, p. 75.

[2] Extract of General Letter to Bengal, 24 Dec. 1776, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 896.

[3] The Amini Commission was appointed in November 1776 and it submitted its report on 25 March 1778.

In the meantime, the rani and other zamindars experienced inconsistencies in their dealings with the Company. Company officials were deeply divided over whether to treat zamindars as employees of government or as persons holding hereditary property rights in their zamindaris, whether to take positive action to protect the zamindars' raiyats and renters from coercion and rack-renting or to let market forces take their course, and whether zamindars should come under British law or remain under customary practice. Zamindars in the districts probably did not understand the bitter divisions among British officials as a consequence of disagreement over principles, although officials argued about principles, but rather as personal power struggles, characterized by acquisitiveness and vindictiveness towards the Indian allies of their British opponents. In the unlikely event that there was a zamindar in Bengal who had not witnessed the acceptance of bribes for the right to farm land, he or she would have learned about the corruption among Company servants from the acrimonious accusations aired before the new Council majority beginning in 1774. The age of Warren Hastings was a rough, competitive one in which fortunes were made and lost quickly and in which personal favoritism and money seemed to count more than principles, hereditary status, or individual merit.

The frequent rotation of Company officers, the reliance on majority votes to determine policy, and the sudden reversals in policy must have puzzled Indians in the mofussil who were accustomed to a more absolute and steady authority concentrated in a single individual who often inherited his position. Sayyid Ghulam Husain Khan, the author of the *Siyar al-Mutakhkherin*, decried the lack of hierarchy in Company rule and his sentiments may have been widely shared. He wrote in the 1780s that "since the conquest ... this country seems to have had no master at all." Company affairs were governed by committee whose members were "perpetually at variance with each other, and perpetually in suspense about their own staying, and their being succeeded by another." Because each Company servant was a transient, he "little cares about what ruins shall remain after him."[4] And because Company servants were generally ignorant of Indian customs and languages, they relied on their Indian servants to conduct their business. Those servants were often "of the lowest clan, and of the vilest kind." Those servants treated Indians "of ancient or illustrious families in an unworthy manner." The only way a high-status individual could "appear in the master's presence" was to "dishonor himself by making a present." If he did not give a present, "he is suffered to languish in the yard with the crowd" or "in the anti-chamber, ranged against the wall like" a statue.[5] Sayyid Ghulam Husain Khan believed that in Mughal times, "high or low" people with

[4] Khan, *Seir*, vol. III, pp. 185–86.
[5] Ibid., pp. 190–91.

grievances had easy access to princes but the British, by contrast, kept themselves aloof and "constantly express an aversion to the society of Indians, and a disdain against conversing with them."[6]

If the absence of clear lines of authority, easy access to officials, and a steady policy were perplexing, Indians may have found the personal behavior of the men who ran the Company just as alien. Richard Barwell and Philip Francis were notorious gamblers, and Francis once informed a friend that he had won "about twenty thousand pounds at whist in a single day," and then he lost almost all his winnings.[7] Barwell and John Clavering fought a duel in 1775, as did Francis and Warren Hastings in 1780.[8] After Francis was discovered on a ladder leading to Noel Catherine Grand's bedroom, George Francis Grand prosecuted Francis successfully for "criminal conversation" with his wife.[9] It may be assumed that the zamindari vakils who lived in Calcutta passed information back to their employers in the districts about the squabbles, high living, and corrupt dealings of the Councillors. Zamindars and their amla may have viewed Company policy with a wary cynicism.

Just how volatile and unpredictable the political environment had become was revealed in March 1775 when Nandakumar, emboldened by the anti-Hastings majority, accused Hastings of taking a bribe from Munni Begum, the widow of Mir Jafar. The prosecution of Nandakumar for forgery of a bond appeared to many people as Hastings' personal revenge against his accuser. Nandakumar was tried and convicted in June and was hung in August 1775. Despite the fact that Nandakumar was a Brahmin (Hindu law held that it was a sin to take the life of a Brahmin) and that forgery had not been considered a capital offense in Bengal, the anti-Hastings majority refused to intervene on behalf of Nandakumar. Nor did the new Supreme Court move, although it was claiming jurisdiction over, and hearing cases against, European officers of government who were accused by Indians of oppressive acts. Hastings' enemies later argued that "the execution had struck such terror into the hearts of all men, that no one dared henceforward to cross his path."[10] Nandakumar's execution must have been sobering for Rani Bishnukumari and her officers, especially when they considered that their allies on the Governor General's Council had a majority of only one.

The position of the rani within Burdwan was also problematical. For most of the decade and a half prior to 1775, major parts of the zamindari had been managed by Calcutta revenue farmers. Had the deference of notables and raiyats

[6] Ibid., p. 154.
[7] Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, p. 150.
[8] Ibid., pp. 111 and 155.
[9] Ibid., p. 259.
[10] Dodwell (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, vol. V, p. 239.

to the Burdwan raj weakened in this interregnum? Would her amla be able to reestablish her authority and meet the revenue demand when the five-year leases expired in 1776? Would the zamindari amla obey her? Would Lala Koshalchandra, an up-country Khatri and long-time servant of the family without much force of character, and Rupnarayan Chaudhuri, able but in poor health, prove efficient managers? Major zamindari servants had helped Braja, during his diwanship, divert funds from the family treasury, despite the rani's efforts to stop it. And could the rani hold her family together? Had Tejchandra's affection been alienated while he was kept from her during impressionable years? Would the raj family's creditors succeed in wresting valuable land from the Burdwan zamindari as British debt law was increasingly enforced? Between 1775 and 1778, Rani Bishnukumari was battered by controversies over family debts, her son's marriage arrangements, her sexual behavior, and her choice of officers to manage her affairs.

After the rani's 1775 victory, the first major challenge to the Burdwan family's unity was posed by a struggle for control of the Amboa Dewry Mahals, the large section of the zamindari left to the family when the rest of Burdwan was farmed to ijaradars in 1771. Since 1771, it had been used as security for the family's borrowing. Creditors were threatening to take this valuable holding from the family through judicial process. Rani Bishnukumari wanted the Company to transfer it to her, in Tejchandra's name, from her mother-in-law in order to protect it from the creditors. This complicated affair involved not only a family feud but also powerful interests among Company servants. Before the struggle for the Dewry Mahals was over, the Company intervened to preserve one of the raj family's most valuable assets. The public interests of the Company and the private interests of its British employees converged and led the Company to protect the raj family from its own divisions.

The case of the Dewry Mahals is also noteworthy because it brought the institutions of a joint family and the revenue needs of government into conflict with the British legal institution of mortgages. Company officials, for private and public reasons, were unwilling in this instance to remain passive while a major family lost its property through the judicial process of foreclosure. Under nawabi government, often private debts of a major zamindar went unpaid or had been discharged by a temporary transfer of land or by a temporary assignment of land revenue receipts to the creditor. Under the Company's new courts, mortgage-holders were increasingly able to obtain permanent title to land as compensation for non-payment of mortgage bonds.

For many decades, the Dewry Mahals (also known at Taraf Manteswar[11]) had been treated by government and the Burdwan raj family as a separate

[11] Manteswar is a name of Shiva. Probably the name refers to the worship of Shiva that the profits of the estate were expected to support.

maintenance for the senior surviving rani, her relatives, and her devotional activities. The boro (big; senior) rani, as she was called, held the estate on a special, fixed-rent (*mukarari*) tenure at the time of Burdwan's cession to the Company. The Company continued to recognize the estate's privileged status after 1760 and to exempt it from revenue farming, as it did similar maintenance lands in Bishnupur, Nadia, and Dinajpur.[12] Thus, when the Burdwan zamindari was leased out to farmers in the 1760s and again 1771, the Dewry Mahals were allowed to remain under the family's management, at the former revenue assessment. The widowed ranis at Kalna who successively held the Dewry Mahals regarded them as their property while the zamindar at Burdwan claimed on occasion that they held the rent-collecting rights at his pleasure. Company officials supported different positions at various times.

The boro rani who held the 780 villages of the Dewry Mahals in 1775 was the grandmother of Raja Tejchandra, the mother of Raja Tilakchandra (d. 1770), and the widow of Mitrasen, Raja Kirtichandra's (d. 1740) younger brother. In 1775, she was over seventy, in poor health, and in "declining understanding." She lived at Amboa (Ambika-Kalna) on the Bhagirathi river, 32 miles east of Burdwan town, and was known to Company servants as "the Amboa rani." She attended Tejchandra's first weddings in 1776 but otherwise rarely or never visited Burdwan. She bathed in the Ganges (i.e., the Bhagirathi), worshiped Shiva, built temples, contributed to religious activities at Benaras, Brindaban, and Puri,[13] and, according to a member of the Burdwan Council, "has numbers of unnecessary servants and priests, together with a vast concourse of vagrant Hindoo Facqueers, upon whom she bestows large sums of money: but whether her servants pay these sums or not, it is hard to say." The major debts she owed to her European and Indian creditors were allegedly due to famine losses, temple building, and the mismanagement of her servants who were said to lease her land at under-rents, embezzle from her treasury, and charge her Rs. 20 for each Rs. 15 they dispursed.[14] The boro rani and her servants allegedly rented and resumed her lands in a highly arbitrary fashion, using neither periodical leases nor an "outcry" or auction system for granting leases.[15]

Had the Dewry Mahals been well managed, they would have given the Amboa rani a sizeable net income. The fact that the estate was scattered through the Burdwan zamindari from the modern Asansol region in the west and to Mandalghat pargana in modern Howrah district to the south, may have made it more difficult to manage than a compact estate. Nevertheless, the permanence

[12] Minute of Mathew Dawson, Burdwan PCOR, Prog. of 20 Nov. 1775, vol. 11.
[13] Rani of Amboa's letter, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 13 Nov. 1775, vol. 11.
[14] Alexander Duncanson to Edward Stephenson, 17 Sept. 1775, extract of Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 18 Sept. 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 814.
[15] Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 25 Sept. 1775, vol. 10.

of the government's revenue demand and the modesty of the rani's personal wants should have ensured a large surplus. A member of the Burdwan Council guessed that the potential annual profits were Rs. 3 lakhs,[16] a sum greater than Raja Tejchandra's stipend from the Company.

The Burdwan rajas had known that this estate was under-rated and that is why their solicitude for the old rani's welfare was sometimes mixed with covetousness. The estate produced a profit that might be employed to discharge the debts of the rest of the zamindari. Perhaps the rajas presumed that what they had given they could take back. On at least two occasions, Raja Tilakchandra had secretly persuaded the Amboa rani's officers to help him with transfers of wealth.[17] The boro rani discovered the arrangements and ended them. The failure of the *choto* (little; junior) rani, Bishnukumari, to pay back Rs. 1,10,000 secretly transferred was believed to be the source of "the Quarrels which have ever since" continued between Amboa and Burdwan, between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.[18]

The old rani did not know whom to trust. Apparently she had no close relatives with her at Amboa. In 1774-75, she needed a new diwan, her former diwan having died. On the recommendation of Rani Bishnukumari, she appointed Brindaban but she soon dismissed him, claiming that he was "forced on her by the Burdwan Ranee,"[19] and that he was leasing land at under-value.[20]

In 1774, a court decision for debt against the Amboa rani raised the prospect that the Burdwan raj family might lose the Dewry Mahals to its creditors. In that year, the Diwani Adalat (civil court) granted a decree for Rs. 15,000 against the Amboa rani to a north Indian banker of Burdwan named Motichandra.[21] The decree was the first of what might become a flood for the rani's debts exceeded Rs. 3 lakhs. So in 1775, Rani Bishnukumari petitioned the Company in her son's name to recognize Tejchandra, in place of her mother-in-law, as the legal owner of the Dewry Mahals. The petition claimed that the Dewry Mahals were part of Tejchandra's zamindari, not a separate estate, and that he had been receiving Rs. 50,000 or so from Amboa since his father's death.[22] Rani Bishnukumari obviously had concluded it was in her interest to have the Dewry Mahals placed under better management so that the debts could be cleared and the government revenue be paid promptly. The estate was in arrears of revenue in the summer of 1775.

16 Ibid.
17 John Rosewell's Minute, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 20 Nov. 1775, vol. 11.
18 Alexander Higginson's Minute, ibid.
19 Edward Stephenson's Minute, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 13 Sept. 1775, vol. 10.
20 Rani of Amboa's letter, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 13 Nov. 1775, vol. 11.
21 He may have been the son of Hazari Mal, the wealthy banker. Hazari Mal had a son named Motichandra and he also had a banking house at Burdwan.
22 Extract of Bengal Rev. Consult., 27 Oct. 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, p. 824, and Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 21 Aug. 1775, vol. 9.

Fortunately for Rani Bishnukumari, influential Company servants were also eager to keep the Dewry Mahals within the family. Over half the debts owed by the Amboa rani were to current or former members of the Burdwan Council. If Indian creditors had pursued their debts in the law courts and forced the dismemberment of the estate, the rani might not have been able to pay off her British creditors. Moreover, most Company servants were reluctant to use the courts to recover zamindari debts. To have done so would have drawn attention to the origin of the debts which in some cases may have been incurred to secure a favor.[23] Even when the debts were the result of loans rather than bribes, they violated the ban on loans to zamindars laid down by Lord Clive.[24] Company servants knew that the government in Calcutta did not want indebted zamindars to lose their property, especially if it was likely to interfere with revenue collection.[25]

The Company servants who were owed money by the Amboa rani had found a means of keeping the rani in possession of her estate while continuing to receive payments, without resorting to the courts. The agency of this happy solution was the Khatri banker, Raja Hazari Mal. Hazari Mal had close connections with both the Burdwan raj family and Warren Hastings. He had been a business partner of Hastings in 1769-70.[26] When Hastings created the General Bank in April 1773 to remit recollections from the districts, he had appointed Hazari and Raja Dyalchandra as the managers.[27] One of Hazari's agents, Mohan Prasad, had filed the forgery charges for which Nandakumar was convicted in 1775.[28] Rajas Hazari Mal and Dyalchandra took over the Amboa debts of Rs.3,33,400 in July 1775,[29] probably at the request of Company servants. The old rani died in December 1777, and in 1779 the Company gave a sanad for the Dewry Mahals to Rani Bishnukumari who was now the senior rani.[30] But the estate remained encumbered by debts. Only the indulgence of Hazari Mal and the fear of inquiries into the origin of the loans to former civil servants prevented foreclosure on the outstanding bonds.

23 A statement submitted under the old rani's seal alleged that the debts originated from unauthorized payments to John Graham, Charles Stuart, and their banians. Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 21 Aug. 1775, vol. 9.

24 Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 196.

25 Henry Lushington was censured for his suit to recover a debt from Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia. Letter to Court, 10 Nov. 1773, *Ft Wm–IHC*, vol. VII, *1773–1776*, p. 237.

26 Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 44.

27 Dyalchandra was the adopted son, and Hazari was the brother-in-law and executor, of Omichand, the powerful merchant whom Robert Clive tricked following the battle of Plassey.

28 Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. I, pp. 26, 155, 245, and 278.

29 Petition from Hazari Mal and Dyalchandra, Extract of Burdwan PCOR, 31 July 1775, Eleventh Report on Justice, 1783, pp. 801–02.

30 Extract of letter from GG, 10 Jan. 1780, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 901.

Rani Bishnukumari enjoyed no such good fortune in the embarrassing controversy over Tejchandra's fourth marriage in 1776. This developed into a major scandal and brought into question the rani's ability to manage the zamindari and preserve the family's honor and reputation. Arranging the marriages of their children was a serious responsibility for major zamindars, for marriages were a form of political alliance. As non-Bengalis, the Burdwan raj family faced a different set of problems than Bengali zamindars in finding spouses for their children. Bengali zamindars formed marriage alliances with families who already held an economic base within Bengal. The zamindar of Burdwan, on the other hand, usually imported youthful Khatri spouses from outside Bengal. This often meant finding both employment and land in Burdwan district for members of the spouses' immediate family. The nature of the employment and land to be provided by the raj family was an important part of the negotiations that preceded each marriage arrangement. Over time, Khatris related to the raj family came to hold rent-collecting rights in various parts of the district although many maintained residences in Burdwan town. The Judge at Burdwan commented in 1777 that "the servants & dependents of the Raja & his family" were so numerous and had "been under-Renters of small Partitions of all the Purgunnahs" in Burdwan that the superior farmers "would find it difficult" to lease their land without engaging them as kutkinadars.[31] A few Burdwan raj relatives acted as superior farmers also. Bakhtar Singh, brother of Rani Bishnukumari, was a major farmer between the mid-1760s and 1776, during which time he claimed to have paid almost Rs. 22 lakhs in revenue.[32] Burdwan raj relatives seemed to have been renters most frequently in the western parganas of Shergarh and Senpahari and in the southern pargana of Chandrakona. The dispersal of relatives and dependents throughout the zamindari may have helped the Burdwan zamindari to check on and thus control the major farmers. Most Burdwan raj marriages added Khatris to the number of potentially useful dependents in the zamindari.

Rani Bishnukumari's oldest and youngest children were daughters. Tatakumari Devi and Chitrakumari Devi were married without controversy to Lala Anandchandra Seth and Lala Dyachandra Seth, sons of one Hingam Lal, who belonged to one of the four highest Khatri gotras. As boys, they were close companions of their brother-in-law, Raja Tejchandra. As men, they became revenue farmers under the Burdwan raj.

Rani Bishnukumari also arranged marriages for Raja Tejchandra in 1776, when he was eleven years old. Tejchandra's father, Tilakchandra, is known to

[31] William Marriott, Supt., Burdwan diwani adalat, to Burdwan PCOR, 17 June 1777, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 19 June 1777, vol. 20.

[32] Petition from Bakhtar Singh, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 17 Sept. 1776, vol. 16.

have married twice; Tejchandra eventually married eight times. Tejchandra's first marriages were to three girls at one time. The rani wanted these marriages to be celebrated in a grand fashion and she requested Company approval to follow "the immemorial custom" of levying the equivalent of one months's rent from each raiyat to defray the costs. She said that "all Ranks of people expend as much as their circumstances will bear" on marriages and that she wanted Tejchandra's wedding to exceed "in elegance and splendour" those of previous Burdwan rajas. She explained what was involved:

By this means the Fame of your [the Company's] generosity and favor to my son may be publickly known and the honour and customs of our Family may be kept up. At a marriage of this kind it is the indispensable Custom to send invitations accompanied by presents to the Rajahs, Zemindars, and Kaitrees, &ca of Bengal, & the people of Rank both far and near for all of whom entertainment & presents must be prepared. Provision must be also made for others who will come uninvited, and a large sum will be required likewise for decorating the house &ca. As the Burdwan Family by the Blessing of god bears an honourable name in the books of fame, people will assemble on this occasion from all quarters, and if the means are afforded me of conducting it agreeable to the ancient customs of the family it will reflect credit and honour on me, whilst if not, shame and disgrace.[33]

The government refused to permit a special marriage abwab until it received permission from the Court of Directors in London. The rani proceeded anyway, in the spring of 1776, shortly before management of the collections were returned to the raj family. It is possible that the zamindari collected the abwab without government permission because in many parts of Bengal raiyats continued to pay marriage cesses, without apparent resentment, decades after the Company banned their collection. In any case, at the age of eleven, Tejchandra was married to his first three wives. Two of the brides belonged to Khatri families in the Punjab with the jati of Mehera; the third was from Burdwan and was presumably a domiciled Khatri.[34]

Tejchandra's fourth marriage, three days after the first, was the controversial one. At roughly the same time that Rani Bishnukumari arranged the first three weddings, she also made an agreement for yet another wedding. Her failure to inform the fourth family about the other three engagements was a tactical blunder with calamitous consequences. Over a year before the joint celebration of the first three weddings, the rani had written to Lala Bahadur Singh of Patna who was a Khatri, a taluqdar, and a connection or dependent of the raja of Ramgarh, now in southeastern Bihar. The rani proposed a marriage between

[33] Petition from rani of Burdwan, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 26 Oct. 1775, vol. 10.
[34] Mukhopadhyay, *Bardhamaner*, p. 125.

Tejchandra and Bahadur Singh's niece, whom he had adopted.[35] Following protracted negotiations, Bahadur Singh agreed to come to Burdwan after the rani promised to appoint him diwan of the raj household. He set out from Patna with 1,000 followers and relations and after five days reached the Bengal frontier where he was met by representatives of the rani. There he presented "the marriage ready money, pairs of shawls, horses, kelaats" to the Brahmins and others who had helped negotiate the marriage. The party then continued on to Burdwan town.

In Burdwan, Bahadur Singh was shocked to learn that three other girls had also been engaged to marry Tejchandra. The rani tried to pacify Bahadur with soothing messages, saying it would disgrace the other three Khatri families to break those engagements which were public knowledge and by promising Bahadur Singh that his niece would be the chief rani. She also offered to marry her niece to Bahadur Singh's son and pay for that marriage.

Bahadur Singh had, in effect, burned his bridges behind him with all the expenses he had incurred. He claimed to have spent Rs. 70,000 "of my own Property & Loans from the Merchants." His chief hope for restoring his fortune and caring for his dependents was to proceed with the wedding. Therefore, his niece, renamed Tej Kumari, was married to Raja Tejchandra three days after the raja's first weddings. But this was not the end of Bahadur Singh's saga. Soon after his niece's wedding, Bahadur Singh heard of "lascivious" behavior by Rani Bishnukumari which he considered "repugnant to modesty & disgraceful to her Rank," as well as injurious to his own honor. He remonstrated to the rani. This angered the rani. She withdrew his "separate provision" and the promise to marry her niece to Bahadur Singh's son, and she sent Bahadur Singh Rs. 4,000 to cover his journey back to Bihar.

At this point, Bahadur Singh's situation was desperate. He said that he had forfeited his caste, that he had been deserted by some of his relatives who returned to Bihar, and that he had received messages from other members of his caste "renouncing any future Alliance with my family on acct. of the Infamous Character of the Ranny." His debts to his creditors in Burdwan and Calcutta were considerable. He claimed "many of my Relations & Friends have died thro want & their horses perished thro scarcity of Grain." He said he was anxious about the safety of his daughter's and Tejchandra's lives. He appealed to the Burdwan Council for help. Specifically, he asked the Council to dismiss Ramkant Roy, the khansamani diwan who administered to the rani's "lascivious wants," appoint a proper person to supervise the education of the raja whom

[35] The details of the negotiations, marriage, and subsequent developments are taken from Bahadur Singh's account to the Burdwan Council of Revenue. Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 26 March 1776, vol. 13.

Bahadur Singh viewed like "my own Child," remove his niece from the rani's company, and provide Bahadur Singh with "a small Portion" so that he could pay his debts and withdraw to Bihar.[36]

While Company officials at Burdwan and Calcutta considered Bahadur Singh's complaints, the Company's five-year leases to the revenue farmers expired. In May 1776, the Company restored zamindari management to the raj family. The rani was given a two-year settlement, in Tejchandra's name. Government regulations forbade zamindari officers from granting lands to themselves and their dependents at an under-rent. Yet the Burdwan Council observed that the rani's managers of the revenue and the household diwan were doing exactly that.[37] Lala Koshalchandra and Rupnarayan Chaudhuri took farms worth Rs. 3,74,003 and Ramkant Roy and other dependents of the rani took farms with a rental of Rs. 16,50,473. Thus, the three men holding charge of the family's affairs had taken land paying much of the government's net revenue demand, and they had made a mofussil settlement that exceeded the government's demand by a mere Rs. 7,000. Warren Hastings and the Calcutta Council ordered that the farms rented by Koshalchandra, Rupnarayan, Ramkant, and their dependents be re-let, observing that the original, under-valued leases would probably lead to "an immediate Failure in the public Revenue" and an eventual forfeiture of part of the zamindari.[38]

Accordingly, Koshalchandra made a new mofussil settlement for the lands in question. Ramkant was summoned to Calcutta so that he could be questioned and instructed to confine his attention to household affairs, to abstain from interference in revenue affairs. When he failed to obey the summons, he was confined by the government until Rani Bishnukumari promised to order her household servants, including Ramkant, to follow government instructions about non-interference in revenue matters.[39]

Ramkant, the household diwan, had now incurred the displeasure of Company servants on two grounds. He was accused of being a partner of the rani in scandalous sexual behavior and he was assumed to have manipulated the mofussil settlement to the Company's and the raja's detriment. Before the Calcutta Council reached a final decision on what to do about Ramkant and the rani's treatment of Bahadur Singh, Colonel George Monson died.[40] This meant that Barwell and Hastings, with his casting vote, once again were the effective majority on the Council. In March 1777, Hastings and Barwell decided to remove Ramkant from his office in order to protect the Company's and the raja's

36 Ibid.

37 Burdwan PCOR to GG, 13 July 1776, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 13 July 1776, vol. 15.

38 GG to Burdwan PCOR, 19 July 1776, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 22 July 1776, vol. 15.

39 Burdwan PCOR to GG, 30 Aug. 1776, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 30 Aug. 1776, vol 16.

40 On 25 September 1776. Clavering died on 30 August 1777.

financial interests, to remove a source of the stain on the raj family's reputation, and, possibly, to get back at the rani for having accused Warren Hastings and his friends of tolerating and benefiting from the embezzlements during Braja Kishor Roy's diwanship. It is impossible to know what weight Warren Hastings and Richard Barwell attached to each of these motives. However, Barwell wrote in a private letter at this time about "information I received of the zemindar's income being dissipated by the Ranee, to gratify the Household Diwan who had been long her kept gallant, and of donations" of more than Rs. 2 lakhs for replacing Braja and Prankishor Mitra in 1775 with Lala Koshalchandra and Rupnarayan Chaudhuri, who were recommended by Nandakumar, "and to make the Ranee the guardian to her son, and the disposer of the income of his estate."[41] John Clavering and Philip Francis not only voted against decisions connected with Ramkant's dismissal, they also refused to sign most of the Council's letters to Burdwan.[42]

In addition to removing Ramkant, Hastings and Francis ordered the appointment of Bahadur Singh, the rani's accuser and the raja's new father-in-law, in his place as diwan of household affairs. This appointment, certain to be resisted by the rani, seemed to be calculated to allow Bahadur Singh to recover money he had lost in coming to Burdwan for his niece's wedding and in the rani's breaking of her promise of a generous "settlement." The rani and Ramkant did resist. Ramkant went into hiding and refused government orders to proceed to Calcutta. The rani disobeyed orders to deliver the household accounts and to accept Bahadur Singh as the new khansamani diwan.[43] The rani wrote to the Burdwan Council, pointing out that the Calcutta Council had explicitly vested her with the authority to appoint her own officers.[44] Bahadur Singh, she said, "is my most inveterate Enemy." If the Company forced the appointment of Bahadur Singh on her and thereby "disgrace me, I am without Resource. I understand that I have no further hope of Life" if the Company persists. She said that she wanted to proceed to Calcutta to plead her case with the Governor General and Council.[45] The Burdwan Council refused to let her go, and kept her confined to the palace.

The rani's conflict with government now appeared on the verge of bloodshed. The Burdwan Council reported that they suspected the rani had hidden both Ramkant and the household accounts "in the inner Zenannah" (female apartments) and that violence would be used to resist the installation of Bahadur

[41] Richard Barwell letter to Mrs. Barwell, 31 March 1777, *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 16 (1918), p. 101.
[42] Extract of Rev. Letter from Bengal, 18 Nov. 1777, Report on Petitions, 1781, p. 155.
[43] Burdwan PCOR to GG, 28 March 1777, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 28 March 1777, vol. 19.
[44] Letter from rani, ibid.
[45] Letter from rani, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 21 April 1777, vol. 19.

Singh. Zamindari troops were guarding the gates of the family palace. However, when Lieutenant Long and the Company's militia marched on the palace to take their places, no resistance was offered.[46] Alexander Higginson, Chief of the Burdwan Council, then forced his way into the rani's private apartments and ordered her to accept Bahadur Singh and turn over the household accounts. Four days later, the rani gave in and invested Bahadur Singh as khansamani diwan.[47] But she also ordered her vakils in Calcutta to file suit in the Supreme Court for the invasion of her zenanna, the imposition of a diwan against her will, and her confinement.

Bahadur Singh's diwanship was brief and frustrating. He complained that the rani continued to hide the fugitive Ramkant in the zenanna, and to withhold the genuine household accounts which would have revealed Ramkant's alleged embezzlements and excessive expenditures. He also accused the household servants of refusing to cooperate with him, providing false accounts, and neglecting Tejchandra's education. He expressed concern about Tejchandra's mental and physical health and requested that the young raja be turned over to him for proper care. "The Rajah, from the Neglect of Evil Servants, has totally given up reading & writing. Thus he is ruined, his mind [emptied?] and from inattention to his Diet his manners are altered, he is become emaciated & near his end."[48] Interested, exaggerated pleading or not, this must have been a disturbed period in Tejchandra's life. Tejchandra was twelve years old in 1777 and for over four years he had been kept apart from his mother, under the care of his mother's enemies. His mother was the subject of scandalous gossip. If Tejchandra had an uncle or another father-figure in his life during the struggles over his guardianship, this does not appear in the records. His father had not been survived by a brother. Bishnukumari's brother, Bakhtar Singh, was reported in 1778 to live "unconnected with the Rajah" and not to "go to the Rajah's House."[49] Whether Tejchandra's relations with his four young wives were stabilizing or otherwise may only be guessed at but it seems improbable. What is certain is that the seven years since his father's death had been tumultuous. It would not be surprising if his education had been suspended and his physical and emotional health had suffered.

In September 1778, the new Chief of the Burdwan Council also voiced concern about the raja's health. William Marriott reported that "his eyes & countenance carry the strongest marks of stupefication." One of the officers of the Diwani Adalat had told him that he was taking *bhang*, a narcotic. Bakhtar

[46] A. Higginson's statement, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 21 April 1777, ibid.
[47] A. Higginson's minute, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 25 April 1777, ibid.
[48] Letter from Bahadur Singh, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 2 June 1777, vol. 20.
[49] Remarks by unnamed Company servant, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 10 Sept. 1778, vol. 26.

Singh had informed Marriott that he believed this report and that he thought the raja was dejected over the death of Russoo, a female employee of his late grandmother, the rani of Amboa. According to Bakhtar, Russoo had been the rani's cash keeper, had been accused of stealing following the rani's death, had been punished, and had died from her injuries.[50]

Another member of the Council attacked Marriott's statement about drugs and Russoo as mere hearsay, uncorroborated by witnesses or other evidence. He observed that Tejchandra's appearance had changed because he had "grown much taller." His silence in the presence of Europeans might be due merely to

> his youth the nature of his education & the little intercourse he has ever had with Europeans ... The Rajah is naturally of a delicate & puny constitution ... the Rajah has never been accustomed to any exercise or bodily exertions, but has from his infancy been reared in all the effeminacy of the Zenanah. To this inactivity and total disuse of his limbs may be attributed a mode of walking

which might at first make it appear he was debilitated or under the influence of drugs.[51] Apparently, no witnesses were found to substantiate what Marriott had heard and the issue of drugs was dropped.

Rani Bishnukumari's 1777 complaint to the Supreme Court against her confinement, the violation of the zenanna, and the appointment of Bahadur Singh bore fruit. The judges on the Supreme Court had begun to issue writs of *habeas corpus* against Company employees who confined Indians without bail for arrears of revenue. The Supreme Court, in other words, had decided that a standard Mughal and Company executive practice was a "most arbitrary abuse of power."[52] It had begun to extend British conceptions of civil rights to Indians although this had not been the intention of the Parliamentary Act that created the Court.

Justice S.C. LeMaistre summoned Alexander Higginson, the Chief of the Burdwan Council, and Lt. Long, commander of the sepoys who confined the rani, to Calcutta to answer the rani's charges. He also ordered the arrest of Bahadur Singh. In his summons, LeMaistre observed that the Regulating Act of 1773 was intended "to protect the Natives of the Country from all Oppressions committed through European Influence." Yet the Burdwan Council had used soldiers to confine the rani and her son. The Council had also imposed "a Man of the lowest State of the People" to conduct the financial and other affairs of the family.[53] And Higginson had, by entering

50 W. Marriott's Minute, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 7 Sept. 1778, ibid.

51 Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 10 Sept. 1778, ibid.

52 The words of Justice S.C. LeMaistre in the Sarupchand case (1777). B.N. Pandey, *The Introduction of English Law into India: The Career of Elijah Impey in Bengal, 1774–1783* (Bombay, 1967), p. 149.

53 It is not clear why LeMaistre thus described Bahadur Singh.

the zenanna, "broke through that Respect and Decorum which, according to the Customs and Usages of this Country, is due to every Person of her Sex, and peculiarly so to a person of such exalted Rank" as the rani. The Council had done all this without the authority of judicial process. The rani had not been accused of any crime or arrears of revenue, "except, perhaps, for the current Month." "The peaceable Enjoyment of a Person's own House" was one of the "Civil Rights" LeMaistre intended to protect, whether it be a person of high or low rank.[54]

The rani's success was a limited one. Although the government dismissed Bahadur Singh and withdrew its sepoys from her palace, Warren Hastings ordered the Burdwan Council to restore Braja Kishor Roy as guardian to Raja Tejchandra, to manage all the raja's affairs, to supervise his education, and to pay particular attention to his health. The government continued Lala Koshalchandra as the zamindari revenue diwan, although he was to act under "the Control and Authority" of Braja.[55]

After Braja returned to Burdwan, the rani's "Managers & Mutsaddies" ignored him and refused to work with him. The Burdwan Council kept up its pressure on the rani. In view of Lala Koshalchandra's continued boycott of Braja and of Burdwan's arrears of Rs. 1.6 lakhs from 1776-77, the Council dismissed Koshalchandra and appointed Braja to act as zamindari revenue diwan, as well as manager of the household.[56]

Rani Bishnukumari, from Amboa, continued to throw obstacles in the way of government orders. The Burdwan Council ordered Bakhtar Singh, the Commander of the raj's household troops and the rani's brother, to muster all the troops at Burdwan but he refused on the grounds that he was employed by the rani and that she had given him no orders.[57] She also blocked government efforts to make an inventory of the moveable property of the senior rani of Amboa, who died in December 1777.[58]

By June 1778, it was clear that the rani's stubborn resistance and boycott of Company-appointed managers were making the conduct of Burdwan affairs impossible. Her repeated defiance of Company orders was undermining the Company's authority and, possibly, its revenues. Braja, who had collected the full revenue in the year of the famine, was in arrears for Rs. 1,55,626 at the end of 1777-78 revenue year.[59] Moreover, the Board of Directors had ordered the

[54] Justice S.C. LeMaistre to A. Higginson, 23 June 1777, Report on Petitions, 1781, pp. 153–54.
[55] Extract of Rev. Letter from Bengal, 18 Nov. 1777, ibid., p. 155. Also Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 14 July 1777, vol 20.
[56] Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 27 Sept. 1777, vol. 21.
[57] Burdwan PCOR to GG, 10 Nov. 1777, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 10 Nov. 1777, vol. 22.
[58] GG to Burdwan PCOR, 12 June 1778, PCOR Prog. of 17 June 1778, vol 25.
[59] Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 21 May 1778, vol. 25.

Calcutta Council to make settlements with the zamindars "on Terms sufficiently moderate to enable them to maintain a Degree of Respect amongst their Dependants." The Board wanted "to impress the Zamindars and Renters with a full Confidence in the Justice of our Proceedings."[60] Accordingly, in June 1778, the Calcutta Council backed down and entered a new, two-year revenue settlement with Rani Bishnukumari, on the same terms as the 1776 settlement, with the important difference that the rani could appoint her own managers of both the revenue and the Burdwan household. The rani was also required to pay off the arrears of Rs. 3,16,538 for 1776-77 and 1777-78.[61] She appointed Kaliprasad Singh to replace Braja as zamindari diwan, and she and Raja Tejchandra returned to Burdwan, once again in control.

Rani Bishnukumari's position in 1778 was decidedly weaker than in 1775 when the Calcutta Council supported her against Warren Hastings and Braja Kishor Roy. Bahadur Singh's allegations that Ramkant Roy was the rani's lover had to have been known widely among Burdwan's elites. The common expectation that a widow should remain celibate was stronger than the view that the families of rajas were not subject to the same conventions as the rest of respectable society. The rani continued to rely on the advice and companionship of Ramkant even though Company officers had dismissed him and regarded him with contempt and distrust and even though he held no official position in the Burdwan raj. Subsequent actions by the Calcutta Council indicated that officials may have given the rani full control of zamindari affairs with the expectation that she and Ramkant would provide them with reasons to remove the rani once again. They did not have long to wait.

[60] Extract of General Letter to Bengal, 5 Feb. 1777. Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, pp. 896–97.
[61] GG to Burdwan PCOR, 12 June 1778, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 17 June 1778, vol. 25.

14 Testing the limits, 1778–1790

Throughout Bengal in 1777, the Company restored zamindars to the lands that had been farmed out in the auctions of 1772. There was no enthusiasm for the zamindars. Company officials regarded many zamindars as incompetent, untrustworthy, and/or impoverished. Zamindars were viewed as the best of several flawed agencies of collection. Revenue farmers had proved unreliable because they had no long-term interest in their farms and because they met with resistance from subordinate rent collectors. Direct government collection from the villages had also failed. Zamindars were restored because they were assumed to have a long-term interest in the prosperity of their territories and because they commanded access to credit and a respect that gave them the potential for efficient collection. The main question in the late 1770s was not who should make collections but rather what the revenue demand should be and what reforms should be introduced into zamindaris often in arrears.

There was no consensus in the late 1770s and 1780s about the proper level for revenue assessments. Parts of Bengal were still depopulated as a result of the famine. It had been hoped that the Amini Commission would discover whether people such as Philip Francis were correct in their view that Bengal was over-assessed. Although the Commission reported in 1778 that large amounts of land had been improperly alienated revenue-free and, if resumed, would add to the revenue, the commission took no position on whether Bengal was over- or under-assessed.[1] Thus, only future experience would tell if the zamindars were capable of paying an increased demand. And, to anticipate the future, even with another decade's experience, Company officials were still divided in their answers. James Grant, in his treatises of 1786 and 1788, argued from his analysis of revenue records that Bengal was grossly under-assessed; John Shore, with his more extensive experience in the districts and the Board of Revenue, argued that Company officials were not yet well enough informed about local conditions to determine the capacity of each zamindari. But he thought the gross collections probably could not prudently be increased.[2]

[1] The Amini Report in Ramsbotham, *Studies*, pp. 99–130.

[2] The Grant–Shore controversy is analyzed in Ascoli, *Early Revenue History*, pp. 42–62.

Unquestionably, Shore was correct. Experience between the restoration of zamindars in 1777 and the Decennial Settlement of 1790 proved that many zamindars themselves did not have the village-by-village records or sufficient control over their own zamindari officers to know what their territories were capable of paying. The Company's effort to gather its own local knowledge through the restoration of the mofussil qanungos (record keepers) in 1781 proved a failure. The large-scale sale of zamindari lands for arrears after the Decennial Settlement of 1790 demonstrated beyond a doubt that many zamindars were over-assessed in relation to their capacity to collect from their villages. Whether that incapacity resulted from a scarcity of economic resources or loose, indulgent, and corrupt managerial practices could only be answered by close investigations of small units within each zamindari. The Company made few local examinations.

From the restoration of the zamindars in 1777 to the Decennial Settlement of 1790, the Company usually settled the revenue with the zamindars for short periods, not exceeding three years. After 1777, relations between the zamindars and the Company quickly settled into a familiar and almost monotonous pattern, with zamindars pleading inability to pay and the Company responding with threats and sanctions. At first, zamindars found the Company willing to consider their complaints. The new settlements were based on the medium rather than the maximum of the three previous years' collections. When a zamindar fell into arrears and persuaded the authorities in Calcutta that his or her zamindari was over-assessed, the Company made modest adjustments in its demands. The gross demand on Bengal and Bihar was lowered annually in 1777, 1778, and 1779.[3]

However, by 1780 British patience was running out. Company officers not only were skeptical of zamindari excuses, they were obliged to increase the revenue to pay for the Company's wars in southern and western India. Historians have often singled out Lord Cornwallis, who arrived in Calcutta in 1786, for initiating harsh treatment of zamindars. In fact, Company policy towards zamindars stiffened appreciably in the early 1780s while John Shore presided over the Committee of Revenue. The Committee, which formed the one-, two-, and three-year settlements of 1781, distrusted zamindars and their excuses. It based the 1781 settlements on the highest level of government collections in the previous ten years.[4] As a result, in 1781 the Company abruptly raised the total demand for Bengal and Bihar by almost Rs. 24 lakhs, or by 9.4 percent.[5] The Committee of Revenue rejected arguments from the amla of the larger

[3] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, pp. 105–06.
[4] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, para. 277.
[5] Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 105.

zamindars against the new demands. In 1781-82 the Company either suspended or continued the suspension of the four zamindars with the largest revenues, who balked at the enhancements and who together accounted for a third of Bengal's and Bihar's demand. The Company appointed temporary managers in their place. Burdwan was already under a sazawal (temporary collector), Nabakrishna, but he was reappointed in 1781 with an enhancement of Rs. 4 lakhs. Nadia was also put under a sazawal, with an increase of Rs. 1 lakh. Rajshahi was settled with Nandalal Roy after Rani Bhawani refused an increase of Rs. 2.5 lakhs. And Dinajpur, whose raja was five years old, was given to Debi Sinha with an increase of Rs. 2 lakhs. In 1782, most zamindars were restored but by the end of the revenue year, the total arrears were higher than they had been since 1777.[6] In April 1783, the government, after failing to reach satisfactory agreements with several zamindars, ordered khas settlements of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, and Rangpur, and then in July it ordered that Nadia and Rajshahi be farmed out.[7]

Burdwan was one of the first zamindaris to experience the new toughness. In the late 1770s, Rani Bishnukumari and her diwans complained repeatedly of over-assessment. In February 1779, the zamindari missed a kist (revenue installment). The Company could not arrest a female zamindar so it confined Diwan Kaliprasad Singh, briefly.[8] In May, the rani's accumulated arrears for the current and previous two years exceeded Rs. 6 lakhs and she was temporarily removed from control of the zamindari. She impeded government's efforts to collect the revenues through a temporary agent by refusing to turn over copies of her mofussil settlement and her *jama wasil baki* accounts (lists of receipts and arrears).[9] In June 1779, the Company compromised and offered the rani a new, lower settlement, based on the medium of collections for 1773-74 through 1775-76, on condition that she immediately pay up her arrears of Rs. 4,26,104 for the year just concluded.[10] This she refused. The government then ordered the sale of part of her Dewry Mahals lands if she failed to discharge her 1778-79 arrears within twenty days. The sale order induced the rani to reach an agreement in August 1779. She accepted a one-year settlement slightly lower than the previous year's[11] and she agreed to pay her arrears.[12]

Were the rani and her officers bluffing when they pleaded their inability to discharge the arrears of Rs. 6,40,584 for the previous three years? Were they

6 COR to GG, 19 Nov. 1781, Comparative View of the Settlements for 1780–81 and 1781–82, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, pp. 876–78.
7 Hunter, *Bengal MS. Records*, vol. I, pp. 67, 70–71, and 73.
8 Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 12 Feb. 1779, vol. 28.
9 Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 31 May 1779, vol. 29.
10 Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 21 June 1779, vol. 29.
11 Rs. 34,12,506 instead of Rs. 35,07,330, exclusive of allowances and zamindari charges.
12 Extract of GG letter, 10 Jan. 1780, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 901.

merely maneuvering to obtain a reduction in Burdwan's 1779-80 settlement? This seems unlikely in view of the facts that in 1780 the rani's debts to private creditors were large and that she was dispossessed of the zamindari in that year, despite the lowered assessment. In April 1779, the rani offered two main excuses for her arrears. She claimed that Rupnarayan Chaudhuri, Lala Koshalchandra, and Braja Kishor Roy had not settled their accounts with her and still owed the zamindari money from the time of their management. Second, she argued that the effects of the 1770 famine were still being felt. As a result of the famine and the money shortage it helped create, three-eights ("six annas") of the rents were paid in grain instead of cash. "Now there is great plenty of grain but a scarcity of money and what formerly could only be obtained for one Rupee, may now be had for eight annas." Grain was so plentiful, "the Ryotts cannot dispose of their crop" and the rani could not collect the full revenue.[13]

In addition to seeking a reduced assessment, Rani Bishnukumari from 1778 struggled to reassert the zamindar's authority in revenue and judicial affairs. The rani complained that the Burdwan Council was settling disputes about rent-collection rights in particular villages without consulting her officers and without using the raja's seals on official orders. "What can be a greater disgrace or Humiliation than to suspend the signature of the Rajah?" she asked.[14] She and her amla also protested the faujdari adalat's dispatch of 354 peons to the villages after raiyats presented twenty-one petitions claiming kutkinadars were demanding proscribed mathuts (cesses) for temples and other expenditures.[15]

Diwan Kaliprasad Singh justified the use of coercion in mofussil revenue collection. "Without punishing the Ryotts of these Provinces it is impossible to collect the revenues from them." Complaints and disagreements about rents should be settled by the diwani adalat, not by the faujdari adalat, he argued.[16] The Burdwan Council implicitly accepted Kaliprasad's argument by reprimanding the faujdar and the maulvi of the criminal court and ordering them to prevent their peons from similar behavior in the future.[17]

When Rani Bishnukumari renegotiated her settlement during the hot weather of 1779, she asked the Calcutta Council to return the zamindari daftars to her charge and to be allowed to pay her revenue in Calcutta rather than in Burdwan. She obviously hoped this would consolidate her authority in Burdwan and prevent the Burdwan Council from interfering so often in zamindari revenue

[13] Rani's letter, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 12 April 1779, vol. 29.
[14] Rani's letter, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 21 Dec. 1778, vol. 27.
[15] Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 9 Jan. and 1 and 3 Feb. 1779, vol. 28.
[16] Letter from Kaliprasad Singh, Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 1 Feb. 1779, vol. 28.
[17] Burdwan PCOR Prog. of 3 Feb. 1779, vol. 28.

collection. The Governor General agreed to her requests,[18] perhaps in order to remove all potential sources of complaint against the Company in the event she fell into arrears again.

Nine years after the death of her husband, Rani Bishnukumari had gained the formal authority she had battled for. She could appoint and dismiss her own officers and she could petition the Calcutta authorities without going through the Burdwan Council. But to obtain these concessions she had been required to pay off the zamindari's arrears. This necessitated going deeply into debt. She borrowed Rs. 9 lakhs from Nabakrishna, a wealthy favorite of Warren Hastings.[19] The rani and her amla managed Burdwan during 1779-80. However, she failed to keep up her payments to Nabakrishna. In the summer of 1780, Nabakrishna petitioned government for permission to take over management of Burdwan so that he could collect the money the rani owed him. Warren Hastings and his Council agreed and they appointed him sazawal or temporary collector of Burdwan. The rani and her son were set aside on an allowance; Nabakrishna collected the Burdwan revenues for two years and repaid himself the Rs. 9 lakhs he had lent the rani through the commission on collections which the company allowed him.[20]

Rani Bishnukumari tried to obstruct Nabakrishna's management in the first year (1780-81). In January 1781, she persuaded the zamindari officers working for Nabakrishna as well as a number of principal revenue farmers to leave Burdwan and head for Kalna with her and Raja Tejchandra. This time the Calcutta Council was in no mood to compromise or permit zamindars to defy its wishes. The Company was hard pressed for money to finance its wars with France, Mysore, and the Marathas. Moreover, the Council anticipated that Bengal "may become the Seat of Troubles" as news of the Company's military difficulties in the south and west spread.[21] So the Company dispatched a party of sepoys which intercepted the rani's entourage at Bansberia. The rani was taken to Kalna and was forbidden to return to Burdwan. An armed guard was

18 Extract of GG letter, 10 Jan. 1780, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 901. In placing the Burdwan zamindari under the Khalsa in 1779, Hastings foreshadowed the abolition of the Provincial Councils of Revenue and the centralization of revenue administration that took place in 1781.

19 Nabakrishna, a Kayastha, had worked under Company officials in various public and private capacities. He taught Persian to Warren Hastings, negotiated with nawabi officials as a "political Banyan" under Governors Clive and Verelst, collected revenue for the Company, and lent money to Company servants. His testimony against Nandakumar in the 1775 forgery trial was crucial to the prosecution's, and Warren Hastings', case. P.J. Marshall, "Nobkissen versus Hastings," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 27, pt. 2 (1964), pp. 382–83.

20 Ibid., pp. 389–90.

21 Philip Francis, who had returned to England, testified to a Select Committee of the House of Commons in July 1782 that if the Marathas invaded Bengal, the rajas of Burdwan, Birbhum, Bishnupur, and Pachet "would be likely to join them." Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, p. 849.

placed around her home to prevent her departure. She was also deprived of all authority in revenue matters and the raja's household accounts.[22]

This was not all. The Company again took Raja Tejchandra from his mother and sent him back to Burdwan. The Calcutta authorities were using the rani's misbehavior to correct a situation that some Company servants had been concerned about for some years.[23] They thought that Bishnukumari's obstructiveness and arrears were due to the pernicious influence of her manager and alleged lover, Ramkant Roy.

The controversial Ramkant was a Kulin Brahmin from a village in modern Hughli district. His father and grandfather had held appointments under the Mughals. Ramkant, who was a Vaishnava, had taken employment in Burdwan as a *pujari* (temple priest) along side his Sakta maternal uncle in a temple belonging to the raj family, for which he received a daily food allowance and 20 bighas of land. By 1774, he had become a favorite of Rani Bishnukumari.[24] Perhaps she had sought him out as a guru, in the manner of many women in Bengal who are beyond their child-bearing years.[25] It is certain that by 1774 Ramkant had married at least two of his three wives because in that year (or in 1772) his famous son, the social reformer Rammohan Roy, was born to his second wife.[26] In 1774, Ramkant had been a principal architect of the rani's strategy to recover control of her son and the household treasury from Braja Kishor Roy. Although he was only the household diwan after the rani's restoration in 1775, he had run the zamindari for a period without consulting the zamindari diwan, Lala Koshalchandra, according to his opponents among the Burdwan amla. Koshalchandra had complained to the Company about being excluded. As a result, the Company had dismissed Ramkant as khansamani diwan and imprisoned him briefly. After his release, he had rejoined the rani as her chief advisor and manager of her affairs.[27]

When Nabakrishna was appointed sazawal of Burdwan in September 1780, the government sent G.G. Ducarel, a senior civil servant, to Burdwan to effect the transfer of the management to Nabakrishna. Ducarel sent back a report highly critical of Ramkant Roy. He said that "it is a matter of Notoriety" that Ramkant "has liberty of Access" to the rani "in a manner quite uncustomary with Gentoo Women of Character, and in fact is generally supposed to govern

22 BOR resolution of 26 Jan. 1781, Supt. of Khalsa Records Prog. of 2 Feb. 1781, vol. 20.

23 [Richard Barwell] letter to Mrs. Barwell, 31 March 1777, "The Letters of Mr. Richard Barwell," *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 16 (1918), p. 101.

24 Narrative of various Burdwan zamindari servants, May 1782, JP, Civil, Prog. 12 of 18 Nov. 1796, vol. 31.

25 Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women* (Chicago, 1975), pp. 138–45.

26 Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohan Roy*, ed. Dilip Kumar Biswas and Prabhat Chandra Ganguli (3rd edn., Calcutta, 1962), pp. 2–3 and 11–12.

27 Narrative of various Burdwan zamindari servants, May 1782.

the Rhanee entirely, and direct her Influence to his own purposes." Ducarel suspected that Ramkant was dissipating Raja Tejchandra's property and that Ramkant and the rani were keeping the raja "in a state of Tutelage & Ignorance," that the raja was "indulged with every trifling amusement which could take off his attention from the Management of his own Affairs, and excluded from those people who were capable of instructing him, or enlarging his Ideas."[28] It was these considerations which led the Company to take Tejchandra away from Rani Bishnukumari in January 1781. At that time, the Company accused the rani and Ramkant of having embezzled over Rs. 11 lakhs that properly belonged to Tejchandra. It also suspended the rani from her management of the Dewry Mahals so that their profits could be used to reimburse the zamindari for the alleged embezzlement.[29]

In this second forced separation from her son, neither the Supreme Court nor the Governor General's Council intervened on behalf of the rani. For four years the rani was isolated at Kalna. In the first year, Tejchandra was assigned to the care of Nabakrishna who was instructed to help G.G. Ducarel in an investigation of the raja's household accounts.[30] Under examination, Ramkant acknowledged that the rani had removed "a considerable amount in Jewels, Gold and Silver Plate" from Burdwan to Kalna and that he, Ramkant, had removed Rs. 54,708 to his own house. In May 1782, the Company delivered Ramkant to Tejchandra so that he could imprison him in his palace until he agreed to restitution.[31] Tejchandra obtained an agreement and then released Ramkant. However, Ramkant did not fulfill his agreement and Tejchandra filed a suit against him that was still pending in 1796.[32]

This period of Rani Bishnukumari's life was her nadir. She was confined in her house at Kalna on a small allowance, she was deprived of her landed estates, she was suspected of scandalous behavior, and her son was accusing her confidant of embezzling his money. She described this period in the following words:

> Being at Amboah the Harcarrach [guard] Mootyram and others so beset every side of my House that it was impossible even for an Ant to escape; I had no notice of my son's situation nor had he of mine. In this manner a space of four years elapsed and I was even destitute of food or Clothing. After this my ungrateful servants joining themselves to others fraudulently took the Maha Rajah with them to Calcutta and ... carried him to live at Nobkissen's.

28 G.G. Ducarel, Supt., Khalsa Records, to GG, 26 Aug. 1780, Extract of Bengal Rev. Consults., 12 Sept. 1780, Home Misc., vol. 207.
29 BOR resolution of 26 Jan. 1781.
30 BOR resolution of 26 Jan. 1781.
31 G.G. Ducarel, Burdwan Col., to GG, 25 June 1782, JP, Civil, Prog. 12 of 18 Nov. 1796, vol 31.
32 Petition of Tejchandra, 24 Sept. 1796, ibid.

Bishnukumari further said that Tejchandra's sister had died "from the strictness of the confinement" at Kalna.[33]

According to the rani's account, Tejchandra called on Warren Hastings while living in Nabakrishna's Calcutta house and "represented that his life was nearly at an end from the various distress he had undergone." Hastings ordered that Tejchandra be returned to Burdwan. Back at Burdwan, said the rani, Tejchandra was surrounded by "fifty Debauched people" who "initiated him in such evil ways that he had no concern left for either House, life or Country."[34]

There seems to be no way of verifying the rani's charges about the raja's life style. The rani wanted to be freed from her confinement and restored to the management of the zamindari and to the company of her son. Presumably, she therefore considered it to be in her interest to accuse Dyachandra, the husband of Tejchandra's sister, and Tejchandra's other associates of corrupting his morals. What is certain is that her influence in zamindari affairs was effectively suspended in the early 1780s while Nabakrishna's was unfettered. Nabakrishna's success in both paying off the zamindari debts and collecting the full revenue demand in 1780-81, after his predecessors had failed, fully justified "the Propriety of this Model of Settlement," according to John Shore, chairman of the Committee of Revenue.[35]

But at the end of 1781-82, Nabakrishna's Burdwan revenue was Rs. 2.1 lakhs in arrears. The Committee of Revenue suspected that Nabakrishna had collected more than he admitted. One member charged his management "had been 'excessively violent' and added that the 'inhabitants ... have in general been taxed by him to an extraordinary degree and far beyond their engagements.'"[36] Nabakrishna was therefore dismissed and G.G. Ducarel, the Burdwan Commissioner, was ordered to make the mofussil settlement of Burdwan. Ducarel found that the non-cooperation of the zamindari officers made this virtually impossible[37] so the Governor General's Council summoned Raja Tejchandra to Calcutta, without his mother, and it persuaded the raja and his officers to accept the settlement for 1782-83 at the same, enhanced level as Nabakrishna's for 1781-82 (Rs. 43,58,026, inclusive of allowances and collection charges.)[38]

From 1782 to 1786, officers approved by the Company managed the Burdwan zamindari for Tejchandra with almost no interference from his mother at Kalna. Each year, the raja and his officers petitioned government about their

[33] Rani's petition, BOR Prog. of 15 June 1787, quoted in *BLI*, pp. lxviii–ix.

[34] Ibid.

[35] COR to GG, 19 Nov. 1781, Sixth Report on Justice, 1782, pp. 873–74.

[36] Marshall, "Nobkissen versus Hastings," pp. 390–91.

[37] Hunter, *Bengal MS. Records*, vol. I, p. 46.

[38] With the difference that Tejchandra was allowed to deduct an additional Rs. 40,000 for collection charges but was given no commission. COR to GG, 19 Aug. 1782, COR Prog. of 19 Aug. 1782, vol. 17.

inability to pay the full demand. For example, in 1782 floods burst through the river banks and the raja made claims for losses against the British pulbandi contractor.[39] In the autumn of 1783, he twice left Burdwan in protest against the inflexibility of government demands and was warned that if he did not return, devote his attention to the collections, and exclude from all public concerns "the discontented members of his family" who had persuaded him to go to Bansberia "on pretence of performing some religious ceremonies," he would be deprived of his zamindari.[40] In April 1784, the raja was placed under guard of peons until he paid his arrears. In June and July 1786, he pleaded his revenues were so inadequate that he was unable to make the usual advances to his raiyats and he pointed out that he had substantially reduced the expenditures of his household. The Burdwan Collector, John Kinloch, thought that Tejchandra was genuinely distressed and recommended that he be indulged. The Board of Revenue refused and ordered the attachment of his property, "beginning with his house and furniture." Kinloch surrounded the raja's palace with sepoys and the arrears of Rs. 1,76,462 were paid up.[41]

As the raja was approaching "the years of discretion," the Company had to decide whether to invest him with full charge of his zamindari. Kinloch had reported that Tejchandra was paying more attention to the management of the revenue collection and his household accounts and that he was more knowledgeable about the capacities of individual raj employees.[42] Although Kinloch also observed that "dangerous and intriguing persons have gained the young Rajah's confidence and are leading him astray,"[43] in November 1786, the government gave Tejchandra sole charge of the zamindari.[44]

Tejchandra was assuming control of the zamindari fifteen years after the death of his father. The loss of his father, the instability of his private relationships including the separations from his mother, the rumors about his mother's scandalous behavior, his multiple marriages, and the frequent shifts in the personnel of the highest zamindari offices meant that he had lived through what must have been an emotionally disturbing childhood and adolescence. Apart from a weak physical constitution and an adversarial, distant relationship with his mother, the consequences of these stormy years on Tejchandra are unclear. What became evident in the following years, however, was that despite possible emotional scars, he managed his zamindari with more success than any other

39 Hunter, *Bengal MS. Records*, vol. I, p. 58.
40 Ibid., pp. 74 and 79–80.
41 BOR Prog., 23 June 1786, vol. 1, and BOR Prog., 3 July 1786, vol. 2.
42 J. Kinloch to GG, 19 April 1786, BOR Prog. 3 of 17 Nov. 1786, vol. 6.
43 J. Kinloch to GG and COR, 25 May 1786, R.J. Hirst, "The Early Collectorate Records of Burdwan, 1786–90," *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 6 (1910), p. 229.
44 BOR Prog. 10 of 17 Nov. 1786, vol. 6.

major zamindar in Bengal. Far from having been incapacitated by his early years, as an adult zamindar he was shrewd, resourceful, persistent, at times belligerent. He had learned to use his officers and vakils to argue, plead, litigate, and manipulate the land sales in a manner designed to protect his holdings. Almost as importantly, he and his advisers recognized the limits of their power and they knew enough to desist at the point at which further obstruction risked loss of the zamindari. They repeatedly tested those limits.

When Tejchandra took full charge of his zamindari in 1786, opinion among authorities in England was swinging in favor of zamindars once again. The failure of efforts to raise the revenue demand on Bengal's zamindaris and the appointment of sazawals to manage Burdwan, Rajshahi, and other large zamindaris had aroused sympathy for zamindars. The East India Act of 1784 had required the Company "to inquire into the alleged grievances of the landholders," which included claims that they were over-taxed and unfairly dispossessed.[45] The Court of Directors in April 1786 sent its historic letter proposing that the government fix the revenue demand permanently and make that permanent settlement with the zamindars. In doing so, the Court seemed to side with the zamindars against the government in Calcutta. It "censured" the recent efforts to increase the revenue from the zamindars and to introduce "farmers, sezawals, and aumeens, who having no permanent interest in the lands, had drained the country of its resources."[46]

From the outset, Tejchandra was almost as prickly and combative as his mother had been. He frequently fell into arrears and then disobeyed the Collector's orders to pay up, deliver records, and attend the Collector's kachari. He infuriated the officers assigned to Burdwan by challenging their judgment and defying their authority. He repeatedly wrote to or visited Calcutta to complain about their actions or about the government's revenue demand. Yet until 1788, Tejchandra was fortunate in having John Kinloch as Collector because Kinloch often supported Tejchandra's pleas for remissions on account of natural disasters. On more than one occasion Kinloch was reprimanded for failing to execute coercive processes which the Calcutta authorities had ordered against Tejchandra. Kinloch was inclined to blame the raja's obstinacy on the advice of Tejchandra's associates.[47]

After Kinloch died in September 1788, his successor, Lawrence Mercer, acted to remove what both he and Rani Bishnukumari considered malignant influences. Mercer was concerned about Tejchandra's character, health, and knowledge of zamindari affairs. He singled out Dyachandra, Tejchandra's

[45] *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. I, p. 14.
[46] Ibid., pp. 19–20.
[47] Hirst, "The Early Collectorate Records," pp. 229ff.

brother-in-law, childhood companion, and major revenue farmer, as being responsible for the raja's uncooperative behavior. Mercer reported that Dyachandra was "generally considered as the principal adviser and Controller of both his public and private actions."[48] Rani Bishnukumari confirmed this in a letter to John Shore. She complained that Dyachandra and his brother, Anandchandra (the raja's other brother-in-law) were ruining the raja with their bad advice, and that the raiyats were distressed as a result.[49] After Tejchandra refused Mercer's demand to dismiss Dyachandra, the government ordered Dyachandra to leave the district. Since he was the renter of Bhursut, Arsa, and other lands, he was given two months to settle his affairs and he was warned that if he returned to the district, he would be confined in the Khalsa in Calcutta.[50] But the raja was no more cooperative during the months Dyachandra lived outside Burdwan.

Raghunath Singh was another confidant, "immediate dependant," and sometime employee whom the Collector hoped to remove from Tejchandra's company. Mercer described Raghunath as "so notoriously profligate" that the raja had never "attempted to introduce him to me well knowing he would not be received."[51] Raghunath was the person who formally charged the Collector's diwan, Lala Roy Singh, with accepting bribes. Once, Tejchandra instituted charges that Raghunath had embezzled valuable items from the raja's wardrobe while he held charge of that department and that Raghunath also owed him Rs. 22,000. But when Raghunath was brought face to face with the raja to answer the charges, Raghunath said he had in his possession letters from Tejchandra that the Collector would "be glad to see." Apparently, Tejchandra was so intimidated by this threat that he had Raghunath released without collecting anything. Ganganarayan Mitra, the raja's *karkun* (chief clerk), whispered to the Collector during the meeting that Raghunath should not be allowed to go near the raja because Raghunath "had a Talisman/Tabeej with the Rajah's name in his possession by which he could make the Rajah do whatever he choose."[52]

Mercer's motive in complaining about Tejchandra is obvious. But why did Rani Bishnukumari complain to the government against her own son? She was concerned about more than the welfare of the raiyats. She was worried about Tejchandra's failure to produce a son. She hinted that his companions had led

[48] L. Mercer, Burdwan Col., to G.H. Barlow, Sub-Sec., 9 Feb. 1789, BOR Prog. No. 40 of 25 Feb. 1789, vol. 61.
[49] Rani of Burdwan to John Shore, received 12 Jan. 1789. *BLR*, p. 63.
[50] L. Mercer to Dyachandra, 2 March 1786, *BLI*, p. 6. Dyachandra was in Burdwan town in March 1791. Ibid., p. 32.
[51] L. Mercer, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 13 Sept. 1790, *BLI*, p. 29.
[52] L. Mercer, Burdwan Col., to Preparer of Reports, 4 March 1791, *BLI*, p. 32.

him into behavior which prevented him from becoming a father. What was that behavior? Had Tejchandra already contracted venereal disease, from which he became seriously ill in 1793?[53] Or did his mother consider his sexual preferences improper or unnatural? The answer is not clear. She wrote to John Shore:

I have only one son, and my mind is wretched at witnessing his conduct ... I have, in order to increase his posterity, provided for four Marriages, the consequence as a mother I think it improper to communicate. My mind is very uneasy and I therefore write these improper matters to you as I know the English Gentlemen are always attentive to the welfare of my family. I am induced to represent without disguise in general terms the domestic affairs and hope that an order will be issued to me to discharge Dyah Chand, Lallah Baboo [Anandchandra] and other evil men and that the Maha Rajah may comprehend the affairs of his country, & transact them with my advice, so that the name of his ancestors may not be forgotten and disgraced. You, Sir, will be pleased to shew such countenance to my request, as shall preserve the reputation of the Maha Rajah's parents.[54]

Rani Bishnukumari also wanted to regain management of the Dewry Mahals which had been first taken from her to reimburse Tejchandra for money she and Ramkant Roy had taken out of the raja's household accounts and then had been assigned to pay her debts to her British creditors.[55] In September 1789, the rani petitioned the Governor General ("Cherisher of the slave") for the return of the Dewry Mahals, saying "my son ... is preparing to degrade me,"[56] apparently by holding back her Rs. 4,000 allowance which the Company had promised her when it confined her in 1781. In 1791, she complained that her son was not sending her allowance regularly and the government ordered the Collector to pay her directly.[57] The raja also held back half the maintenance allowance for the two widows of Raja Chitrasen, his great uncle, leading them to complain that "we are in great distress & near 200 of us widows are without support and have only a meal at night." It seems that under revenue pressure from government, Tejchandra was diverting the pensions of his elderly relatives.[58] Perhaps he felt badly about this because in May 1791 he turned over management of the Dewry Mahals to his mother as his tenant.[59] She became his largest revenue payer.

While the rani and Burdwan Collectors worried about Tejchandra's personal development and tried to free him from what they considered malign influences,

53 W. Williams, Surgeon, to W.A. Bruce, Burdwan Col., 17 May 1793. BOR Prog. of 20 May 1793, vol 154.
54 Rani of Burdwan to John Shore, received 12 Jan. 1789. *BLR*, p. 63.
55 Extract of Rev. Letter from Bengal, 27 Nov. 1782, Home Misc., vol. 207.
56 BOR Prog. of 17–28 Sept. 1789, vol. 77.
57 GG to BOR, 18 March 1791, *BLR*, p. 142.
58 BOR to C.A. Bruce, Burdwan Ag. Col., 23 Sept. 1791, with rani's petition enclosed, *BLR*, p. 185.
59 BOR to GG, 30 May 1791, *BLR*, p. 169.

Tejchandra and his amla argued with government about revenue matters. These seemed to upset Tejchandra more than its efforts to separate him from his childhood companions and brothers-in-law. He and his amla protested vigorously about the reduction in zamindari allowances, about the rigidity of the revenue demand in years of natural disaster, and the beginning of the land sales in 1789 to pay for arrears.

In 1787, the Company had imposed significant economies on the zamindari by cutting its allowances for zamindari servants and zamindari troops. John Kinloch halved the salaries of the principal zamindari officers and dismissed fourteen of the seventeen vakils the raj had employed. In the process, he reduced the salaries of zamindari amla from Rs. 68,720 to Rs. 28,720, bringing an addition of Rs. 40,000 to the Company's net revenue.[60] He added another Rs. 53,000 by reducing the zamindari troops by roughly half, to 1,000 men. As a means of partially overcoming the raja's objections, command of the troops was transferred from their British officer to Tejchandra. The troops were used to guard the zamindari kacharis in each pargana and to escort treasure and suppress disturbances.[61] These and similar economies increased the company's net annual revenue from Burdwan by Rs. 1,62,587 without adding to the gross collections.[62]

Even more galling to Tejchandra than these reductions in his sources of patronage and display was the Company's unsympathetic response to requests for revenue adjustments on account of crop damage. The Burdwan flood of 1787 was of exceptional severity. Heavy rains in late September caused the Damodar and Ajay rivers to overflow and covered fields in many parganas of Burdwan with two to three feet of water. In certain areas, cultivators sowed their *rabi* (spring) crop three times without success.[63] Some people drowned, many cattle died, and in Burdwan town, brick houses were badly damaged and "not a vestige of a mud house" remained.[64] The Collector asked for permission to tour in order to estimate the extent of damages, and Tejchandra asked for revenue suspensions; the Board of Revenue denied both requests. Legally, despite exceptions in practice, natural disasters were not grounds for revenue remission. The raja's revenue officers and farmers began to use "harsh means" to collect rents, the first time they had used "such rigorous extremities" in Burdwan, according to the Collector. The Board of Revenue responded by ordering Kinloch to protect the peasants from oppression[65] on the assumption that the raja and his renters

[60] John Kinloch, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 10 May 1787. BOR Prog. of 18 May 1787, vol. 16.
[61] Kinloch to BOR, 25 April 1787, BOR Prog. of 4 May 1787, vol. 15.
[62] BOR to GG, 11 Sept. 1787, BOR Prog. of 11 Sept. 1787, vol. 24.
[63] *BLI*, p. lxx
[64] Charles Bruce, Burdwan Ag. Col., to BOR, 9 Oct. 1787. BOR Prog. of 12 Oct. 1787, vol. 26.
[65] Kinloch to BOR, 8 Feb. 1888, and BOR to Kinloch, 15 Feb. 1788, BOR Prog. of 15 Feb. 1788, vol. 31.

should suspend the demand on injured cultivators and pay the revenue demand by drawing on their savings or by borrowing. By February, the raja was Rs. 8 lakhs in arrears.

Tejchandra had few options. He could borrow money and he could apply coercive pressure on his farmers. He did press his farmers, imposing "daily severities and repeated indignities" on some whom the Collector thought might be "totally incapacitated" because in previous years they had paid regularly but now they suffered the coercion without paying. And the raja himself was coerced. The government suspended his moshaira (monthly allowance) and the pay of his amla and paiks. It also attached his personal belongings, including his clothes, "Patna Black and Gold Furniture," silver plate, thirty-five Chinese, European, and "country" paintings, seven elephants, and twelve horses.[66] The attachments were presumably intended to humiliate him into paying his arrears rather than to raise money to make good the revenue deficiency, for their value was small compared to the arrears.

At this point, Tejchandra asked and received permission to go to Calcutta to discuss his arrears with the Board of Revenue. The Collector released a palanquin and clothes for the raja to use on his trip.[67] Tejchandra remained in Calcutta for almost three months and worked out a schedule of repayments to be completed by November 1788.[68] Perhaps the June report that grain prices in the southern Burdwan parganas had risen by 500 percent convinced the Board that the 1787 flood had inflicted severe damage and thus the raja indeed deserved a limited indulgence.[69]

The 1788 stand-off between Tejchandra and the government was a classic conflict of the pre-Decennial Settlement period. The government coerced the zamindar who claimed that a natural disaster had damaged the crops; the zamindar in turn coerced his farmers; his farmers coerced their sub-renters and raiyats; the government urged the Collector to protect the raiyats, arguing at the same time that the superior holders exaggerated the extent of their losses and that in any case their agreements did not allow revenue suspensions for seasonal calamities. In 1788, Tejchandra avoided having land sold to pay his arrears. After 1788 he was not as fortunate. Beginning in 1789, for the first time, sales of zamindari lands became the ordinary means of recovering arrears.

Relations between Tejchandra and government remained strained after his return to Burdwan in July 1788. In the summer of 1788, bad weather damaged the crops in southern and northern Burdwan for a second year in a row. In

66 Kinloch to BOR, 29 April 1788, BOR Prog. of May 1788, vol. 36.
67 Kinloch to BOR, 30 April 1788, ibid.
68 BOR to Thomas Brooke, Burdwan Ag. Col., 22 July 1788, *BLR*, pp. 18–19.
69 Hirst, "The Early Collectorate Records," p. 239.

southern Burdwan, five parganas were flooded, without abnormal rainfall, allegedly because of the raja's neglect of the river embankments, and damaged the crops.[70] Northern parganas suffered drought,[71] and the raja again fell into arrears. A large gang of dakaits in northern Burdwan attacked a Company party escorting treasure from Birbhum to Calcutta and Tejchandra, theoretically responsible for law and order, was forced to compensate the Company for the stolen money.[72] He was also fined Rs. 5,000 for repeatedly disobeying orders to provide records of Burdwan's revenue-free land.[73] He was scolded for "disrespectful" conduct.[74] By April 1789, Burdwan had accumulated substantial arrears.

For the second year in a row, Burdwan reached a crisis point as Tejchandra and the government tried to outmaneuver each other. This year, though, the government refused all his pleas for indulgence. The drought and floods in the summer of 1788 had been less destructive than the major flood of 1787. The Collector observed that Tej's maintenance of "useless Sepoys, elephants &c" and his building projects in various parts of Burdwan indicated that he was not as distressed as he claimed. Among the building projects were the 109 Shiva temples just west of Burdwan town that Rani Bishnukumari dedicated in 1788 to Radha and Krishna,[75] perhaps to satisfy both Ramkant Roy's Vaishnavism and her own Shaivism.[76] The Collector also reported that the farmers in greatest arrears were Tejchandra's close and wealthy dependents, including his Calcutta vakil, Bindaban Babu, who farmed Mandalghat, and his brothers-in-law, Dyachandra and Anandchandra.[77] Therefore, the government took away Mandalghat and sold it at public auction. However, this giant pargana, with a jama of Rs. 2.1 lakhs, fetched only Rs. 66,200. The raja was angry about the low price. He went to Calcutta and complained that by shifting the date of the auction, the government had prevented "respectable" people from bidding.[78] In fact, Mandalghat had deteriorated in value because of repeated floods, the inadequacy of embankments, and migration of many inhabitants.

Because of the remaining heavy arrears, government announced its intention to take the Burdwan zamindari out of Tejchandra's control for 1789-90 and

[70] Letter from Resident at Radanagore, 21 March 1789, *BLR*, p. 73.
[71] Charles A. Bruce, Burdwan Asst. Col., to J. Kinloch, 7 Aug. 1788, *BLR*, p. 30.
[72] Joseph Sherburne, Birbhum Col., to Thomas Brooke, Burdwan Ag. Col., 15 Oct. 1788, *BLR*, p. 24.
[73] GG in C to BOR, 1 Oct. 1788, *BLR*, p. 23.
[74] BOR to Brooke, Burdwan Ag. Col., 7 Oct. 1788, *BLR*, pp. 22–23.
[75] This construction of Shaivite temples to propitiate Vaishnava deities was unusual but not unique. Bhattacharyya, *A Corpus of Dedicatory Inscriptions*, p. 14.
[76] Ramkant's second wife, Tarini Devi, the mother of Rammohan Roy, came from a Shakta family but after her marriage became a Vaishnava.
[77] L. Mercer to BOR, 31 May 1789, and enclosure, *BLI*, pp. 17–18.
[78] Hirst, "The Early Collectorate Records," pp. 230–31.

lease it to farmers.[79] This threat induced Tejchandra to settle reluctantly with government in August 1789 at the same revenue as in previous years, minus Mandalghat.[80] In April and November 1790, government ordered the sale of part of the Dewry Mahals to satisfy the long-standing debts owed to Hazari Mal and the European creditors;[81] the *maharaja* averted sales both times by making partial payments.

When the Decennial Settlement of 1790 was imposed, Tejchandra was twenty-five years old. The two extended periods of separation from his mother and the series of crises in the zamindari's affairs had apparently given him sufficient mental and emotional toughness to cope with the harsh policies of John Shore and the Decennial Settlement. His own shrewdness, the presence of capable advisers and cooperative mofussil gentry, the high productivity of Burdwan's lands, and easy access to the markets of Calcutta equipped Tejchandra to face the sweeping changes of the 1790s with at least a chance of keeping his zamindari. Most major zamindars were in weaker positions.

79 J.H. Harrington, Sec., BOR, to L. Mercer, 1 July 1789, *BLR*, p. 75.
80 Hirst, "The Early Collectorate Records," p. 231.
81 J.H. Harrington to L. Mercer, 22 April 1790, *BLR*, p. 111; L. Mercer, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 18 Nov. 1790, BOR Prog. of 19–20 Nov. 1790, vol. 104.

15 Burdwan under the Decennial and Permanent Settlements

Zamindars entered a new era in the spring of 1790 when the Company offered them ten-year settlements. Those settlements were declared permanent in 1793. The distinctive feature of the Decennial and Permanent Settlements was not that they were made with the zamindars. Zamindars, of course, had been collectors for most of the eighteenth century. Nor was the level of the demand remarkable since it was but "marginally" higher than previously, although "stable or falling" agricultural prices in the 1790s made the demand difficult to realize.[1] Instead, the crucial innovations were the permanency and the mode of recovering arrears. In the long run, the fixity of the land tax attracted investments into the developmental dead-end of rent-collecting rights, rather than into forms of enterprise that were likely to lead to higher productivity or balanced economic growth. In the long run, the fixed tax declined as a proportion of the money supply as inflation and the cultivation of new lands vastly expanded the rental income available from the working peasants.

The other crucial innovation of the 1790 and 1793 settlements was that zamindars' hereditary rights to collect the revenue were required to serve as security for the government's revenue, in practice as well as in theory.[2] Beginning in 1790, failure to meet the government demand normally led to sale at public auction of that portion of a zamindari estate sufficient to realize the arrears. Other expedients for recovering arrears, such as temporary remissions, khas management, management by a sazawal, and short-term leases to farmers, no longer were used except in unusual circumstances.[3]

What made the new rules requiring automatic attachment and sale of land in arrears so devastating to the zamindars was the combination of high seasonable variation in agricultural production and prices and the low margins of profit available to the raiyats and ultimately to the zamindars. High rental rates, to pay

[1] Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.2, pp. 124 and 143.

[2] *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. I, p. 20.

[3] Khas management was often used for brief periods between the time the government attached land in arrears and the time the land was auctioned and given possession to the new owner.

the cost of intermediate collection and the government's demand, depressed the raiyats' profits. John Shore estimated that the raiyats were compelled to pay half their "gross produce" and that in many areas the assessment was so high that raiyats managed to pay only by "secretly holding lands which pay no rent."[4] Raiyats and supra-village intermediaries had been resisting demands from zamindars for generations. Now, with the government's demands rigid at the top of the collection pyramid and a narrow profit margin for the majority of raiyats at the bottom, zamindari survival in the near term would require curtailing both the numbers and special privileges of the favored dependents and head raiyats who stood between the zamindar and the bulk of the laboring agriculturists. Few zamindars and their amla were culturally prepared or powerful enough to tighten management procedures by abruptly abolishing traditional indulgences.

How much land was transferred as a result of sales for arrears? Sirajul Islam wrote the fullest analysis of the sales after 1793. He found that in the ten years following the Permanent Settlement, land paying roughly 65 percent of the annual jama of Bengal was sold. His figures omit both the lands sold for arrears in 1790-93 and the lands transferred by private sales. On the other hand, a substantial portion of the purchases included in his figures were benami (false name) purchases by the original owners who deliberately forfeited their lands in the hope of repurchasing them free of encumbrances and arrears. Using the statistics for known benami repurchases and estimates for other benami transactions, Islam concluded that the real loss of land amounted to the equivalent of perhaps 45 percent of the annual jama. Since large zamindaris forfeited proportionally more than small ones, he further estimated that the ten largest zamindaris were responsible for three-fourths of the sales.[5] Of the six largest zamindaris who together had paid half of Bengal's land revenue, only Burdwan entered the nineteenth century with more than half its territory intact.

One effect of the Permanent Settlement, therefore, was to reduce the property of the largest zamindars. This reversed the policy of the previous three decades. Until 1790, the Company had maintained most of the largest estates in the same families as had held them under the Mughals. No matter how many times the Company had temporarily deprived the zamindars of their management in favor of revenue farmers, sazawals, and British Collectors, the Company had implied recognition of the zamindar's property by granting maintenance to suspended zamindars and then had returned them to control of their holdings. In this respect, the Permanent Settlement was a decisive break with previous policy.

For village-level renters, it made little difference if their rents were destined

[4] John Shore, Minute of 18 June 1789, paras. 109 and 117.

[5] Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, pp. 144–57.

for the old zamindar or an auction-purchaser. Many auction-purchasers were the zamindari amla and the intermediate tenure-holders to whom raiyats had paid rents in the past. Under the unforgiving rules of the new system, old and new zamindars alike were under pressure to collect promptly. Neither category was in a position to indulge raiyats in difficulty as often as in the past. On the contrary, the strictness of the new system forced some land managers to cancel the preferential arrangements enjoyed by superior raiyats. Neither old nor new zamindars returned much to the communities in which raiyats lived in the form of irrigation works,[6] roads, schools, or agricultural investments. Although a few superior landholders encouraged cultivation of new crops such as indigo, the bulk were ignorant of agricultural affairs and confined their interest to the extraction of rents and the performance of life-cycle and religious rituals. Agricultural technology remained basically unchanged.[7]

The mechanisms of revenue extraction began to change in significant ways in the 1790s. The introduction of a vastly expanded judicial system, in the mofussil as well as the district headquarters, thrust the government into the role of arbitrating disputes over rents and coercing rent defaulters. Detailed analysis of how the new judicial system affected intermediate landholders comes in the next chapter. Here, it is necessary to note the start of a shift from private coercion and infliction of bodily pain to state judicial processes accompanied by detention and distraint of property. Prior to 1793, most coercion of superior raiyats had occurred without reference to or assistance from employees of the Company. The naibs (deputies) of the zamindar's major renters and their under-renters had sent peons to villages with arrears, sometimes with orders from zamindari officers but often without, to harass or detain raiyats until they paid what was demanded of them. The Collector, in his capacity as Judge and Magistrate, had the legal authority to assist in this process, but he had been far too busy to attend to the common cases of rental arrears and disputes. The Burdwan Collector observed in 1790 that Tejchandra "acts both as Judge and party in the Construction to be put on" the agreement between the zamindar and his renters.[8] Henry St. George Tucker told the 1832 Select Committee that "prior to 1793, I would say, there was scarcely a regular tribunal for the administration of civil justice in the country." Collectors presided over civil courts but "everything gave way or was subordinate to the duty of collecting revenue."[9]

[6] In the 1790s, the Company provided zamindars with allowances for maintaining river embankments. It is doubtful that those allowances were fully expended for that purpose.

[7] Kumar and Desai (eds.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II, p. 86.

[8] L. Mercer to BOR, 31 July 1790, BOR Prog. of 1–18 Oct. 1790, vol. 101.

[9] Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Committee, 1831–32 (Revenue), British Parliamentary Papers: Colonies, East India, vol.9 (Shannon, 1970), p. 152.

W. W. Hunter exaggerated when he wrote that "the records place beyond doubt that until 1793, civil justice was unknown in Bengal." But he may have been correct in saying that civil justice had formed "the least part" of the Collectors' responsibilities. He found that in Birbhum and Bishnupur, with over a million people, an average of eighteen civil suits were instituted annually between 1787 and 1793.[10]

The 1793 regulations established a much more elaborate judicial system, with judicial officers who were not responsible for revenue collection. The district Judge and his British assistant heard suits of large value and received appeals from the lower courts. Native Commissioners were stationed in the mofussil with authority to try complaints of up to Rs.50. Bengalis were quick to utilize the new courts for rental and other debts, both in the mofussil and the district headquarters, despite the long delays and heavy costs of litigation. Whereas before 1793, civil suits decided annually in a single district numbered in the tens or hundreds,[11] on 27 February 1795, the courts in Burdwan district had pending over 30,000 suits, mostly for arrears of rents.[12] From 1793 through 1801, the *munsifs* and other Native Commissioners of Bengal settled 328,064 cases, including those referred to arbitration, and they had an additional 131,929 cases pending on the first day of 1802. The British officers had decided another 31,050 cases.[13]

In introducing the new system of civil justice, Lord Cornwallis proclaimed that the courts were to enhance the "security of property." "The people must feel and be satisfied of this security, before industry will exert itself, or the monied men embark their capitals in agriculture or commercial speculations."[14] The new courts, like the Permanent Settlement itself, had a more complicated effect than Cornwallis anticipated. The procedural delays and costs were often more decisive than the justice of a complaint in determining whether litigants retained or lost their rights to a share in the land's produce. A final court decision, in the early years of their operation, typically took months, and if appealed, years, while auction sales proceeded within weeks of arrears. The

10 Hunter, *Annals*, pp. 338–39.

11 It is unclear if the small number of decisions recorded included the "irregular" and "secret" proceedings which consisted of "*ex parte* correspondence" between government officers used to settle "disputes between landholders and their tenants and under-renters." Minute of GG Lord Cornwallis, 11 Feb. 1793, Second Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, 1810, *British Parliamentary Papers: Colonies, East India*, vol. 1 (Shannon, 1971), App. 9A p. 350.

12 The 1793 regulations had abolished the fee, in the form of a percentage of the sum sued for; a 1795 regulation restored the fee in order to discourage litigation.

13 *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. I, pp. 113–15.

14 GG to COR, 6 March 1793, *British Parliamentary Papers: Colonies, East India*, vol. 1, App. 9, p. 338.

zamindars consequently exercised a more urgent and comprehensive severity on their intermediaries, and they in turn on their agents and tenant-cultivators. Prompt, full payment became the necessary objective through the whole land management pyramid.

The coercive power of zamindars and their intermediate collectors was restricted, although it is uncertain by how much, by the 1793 transfer of the zamindars' formal police authority to the Company. Since Company Collectors, in their capacities as district Magistrates, had previously been giving orders to the thanadars (police officers), the change may have been more symbolic than real. In Burdwan, 801 of the 3,079 thanadari force were dismissed in 1793. The remaining thanadari village-level chaukidars and paiks continued to act on behalf of both the Company thanadars and the zamindars. Apart from the thanadari chaukidars and paiks, the raja of Burdwan had thousands of his own paiks to help in collecting and escorting revenue. The Burdwan Collector reported in 1794 that altogether Burdwan had 17,384 village paiks.[15] In Burdwan and elsewhere, the zamindars clearly retained much of their traditional potential to force raiyats to pay arrears. That potential, though, must have been a limited one when many raiyats fell behind in their rents because the average village contained just over two chaukidars or paiks – too few by themselves to arrest or seize the crops from a combination of raiyats.

The remainder of this chapter first describes how the rents of the Burdwan zamindari were collected in the 1790s and then follows the history of the zamindari through the period of heavy auction sales initiated by the Decennial Settlement of 1790, to 1800 when a relative calm returned to Burdwan after six decades of tumult – of invasions, conflict with the Company, and turmoil within the raj family. Rani Bishnukumari's death in 1798 terminated the stormy rivalry between mother and son. The government's 1799 decision to strengthen the power of zamindars and their farmers to coerce rent payments from their raiyats enabled zamindars to collect their revenue with greater promptness. Beginning in 1799, auction sales of land in arrears began to decline in Burdwan and in Bengal generally.

Between 1790 and 1800, it seemed at times that the Burdwan raj family might lose most of its estate. In Burdwan district, land with a jama roughly equal to the annual land revenue demand on the whole district was sold for arrears at government auctions. Government took the whole zamindari out of Tejchandra's hands and settled it with farmers in 1790-91; government confined Tejchandra in 1793 and 1794; and Tejchandra withdrew from management of the zamindari in early 1794 by selling it to his mother. The Collector took over the management of the zamindari in 1794-95; and Rani Bishnukumari acted as

[15] McNeile, *Report on the Village Watch*, pp. 82–90; Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. IV, p. 84.

zamindar from 1795 until her death in 1798, during which time most of the zamindari was brought to sale.

The Burdwan raj family was more fortunate than the other large zamindari families of Bengal, who lost proportionately more land than lesser zamindars. Sirajul Islam has estimated "the ten great families" of Bengal lost 61 percent of their holdings, after deducting for repurchases and benami transfers, between 1794 and 1819, with 95 percent of the transfers occurring between 1794 and 1803.[16] By contrast, the Burdwan zamindari emerged in 1800 with a net jama of Rs.26,41,514 or a loss of 19 percent from the 1791 jama and a loss of 34 percent from the 1788 jama of Rs. 40,15,109. Thus the Burdwan zamindari suffered a substantial reduction as a result of the rigid collection procedures introduced in the late 1780s and regularized in the Decennial Settlement of 1790. But compared to other zamindari families, the Burdwan raj family was successful in repurchasing the bulk of its land. Persistent negotiation with government, clever buying and selling at the public land auctions, timely borrowing, utilization of the new legal system, retention of loyal farmers and astute estate managers, and, through it all, an impressive tenacity brought Tejchandra and Bishnukumari through a period which left the neighboring zamindaris of Bishnupur, Birbhum, and Nadia in ruins.

The organization of zamindari rent collection in Burdwan remained essentially unchanged until the early years of the nineteenth century. The estate was remarkably uncentralized. The raja leased the zamindari to revenue farmers alternately called *ihtimamdars* (holders of a trust or responsibility) and mustajirs (farmers or renters). Many farmers rented whole parganas, the largest of which contained over 300 villages. In 1793, the zamindari was divided into ninety-two farms held on leases of three, five, eight, and nine years duration.[17] Farmers enjoyed virtual autonomy in settling the rents of their under-farmers (kutkinadars). The Collector believed that the raja had no officers stationed in his farms to oversee the collections[18] although thousands of village paiks and patwaris (record keepers) were nominally under his authority. When the Collector searched the zamindari kachari for records detailing village assessments, he could not find them.[19] When the government ordered Rani Bishnukumari to supply a list of the village patwaris and gomashtas (village agents) in 1797, she replied that she was unable to obey because Burdwan had always been "farmed out" and that it was the farmers' responsibility to maintain such lists.[20]

Most of the raja's principal farmers were residents of Burdwan town and were

16 Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, pp. 148 and 157.

17 Raja's letter, enclosure to W. Brooke, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 28 Feb. 1793, *BLI*, pp. 37–38.

18 S. Davis, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 1 July 1793, *BLI*, p. 57.

19 Ray, *Change*, p. 94.

20 Rani's petition, enclosure to R. Ireland, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 31 May 1797, *BLI*, p. 283.

considered to be his dependents. They included Tejchandra's relatives and amla. Among the most important farmers were Lala Dyachandra and Lala Anandchandra, the raja's brothers-in-law; Nandakumar Roy, the raja's diwan and son of the former diwan Braja Kishor Roy; and Buddanchandra Mitra, the raja's vakil in Calcutta and a major adviser. These people had houses in Burdwan town and managed their farms absentee, through naibs (assistants). It is apparent that Tejchandra did not choose to initiate legal proceedings for arrears against many of the farmers who were his personal associates and instead appealed to the Company for leniency and applied to bankers for loans. In fact, Tejchandra claimed that he did not require his farmers to execute a *kabuliyat* (counterpart of a lease) "for the sake of their honor."[21] Although he was "irregular and improvident" in his relations with his mustajirs,[22] Tejchandra's vakils did proceed through the courts in cases involving both flagrant arrears and farmers residing in Calcutta.[23] Towards the end of the decade, when sales of his lands peaked, Tejchandra became less indulgent and used the courts more frequently.

A few Calcutta people farmed lands in the Burdwan zamindari. One of Tejchandra's largest farmers in the early years of the 1790 settlement was Gangagobind Sinha, who had been diwan to the Calcutta Council of Revenue under Warren Hastings and an important assistant to John Shore. Gangagobind's manager did not reside in Burdwan and his agents had trouble collecting.[24] As Gangagobind Sinha and a series of Calcutta people who tried to collect in Chitua and Mandalghat parganas learned, Burdwan was a difficult area for outsiders to manage. For example, when Nilmani Haldar of Calcutta bought at auction 114 villages, Dwarkanath Singh disputed the inclusion of a village named Gopalnagar in the lot. Dwarkanath's men forcibly resisted the efforts of the Collector's agents to give possession of the village to Nilmani. And when Nilmani tried to hold his mofussil puniya, Dwarkanath prevented it by dismissing the Brahmins and by "beating the Tomtom," presumably to inform the villagers that the puniya was canceled.[25] The failure of some or all of the Calcutta farmers to attend the raja's puniya, at which farmers in effect acknowledged the raja's superiority and received his *parwana* (order) to hold the mofussil puniya and begin the collections, may be a reason why the raja was harsher with them than with local farmers.[26]

In addition to the large number of farmers resident in Burdwan town and a

[21] BOR to L. Mercer, 25 April 1791, *BLR*, p. 166.
[22] W. Brooke to BOR, 19 Aug. 1792, BOR Prog. of 15–31 Aug. 1792, vol. 142.
[23] *BLI*, pp. 69, 71, 93, and 99.
[24] W. Brooke to BOR, 27 May 1792, BOR Prog. 1–15 June 1792, vol. 136.
[25] R. Ireland to BOR, 11 Aug. 1797, *BLI*, pp. 293–94.
[26] Baranasi Ghosh, who farmed pargana Balia, was one Calcutta farmer who did not attend the puniya and was prosecuted for arrears. S. Davis to BOR, 17 Aug. 1793, *BLI*, p. 69.

scattering of Calcutta farmers, the Burdwan raj engaged mofussil gentry as mustajirs. Two of the most powerful, and roughest, of the mofussil farmers were Dwarkanath Singh and Raghunath Singh, both of whom were at one time friends of Tejchandra who later were jailed on his complaints of debts.

Dwarkanath Singh was the son of a Khatri trader from the Punjab who often visited Bengal and then married a girl from Singur, in modern Hughli district. Dwarkanath came to Singur to live with his maternal uncle, and Raja Tilakchandra, often partial to fellow Khatris, engaged him as a minor ijaradar.[27] He also farmed sizeable ijaras under Tejchandra and was confined in 1790 and 1791 for his arrears of Rs. 52,000.[28] Dwarkanath entered the indigo business, challenging his neighbor, Ross Jennings, who claimed his own indigo factory was "allowed to be the first in the world." Jennings complained that Dwarkanath committed "outrages" against his factory and indigo raiyats beginning in 1789 and bribed the seven vakils who represented the raiyats in court. In 1793, Jennings said that Dwarkanath was building his own indigo factory within "my Plantation ... and is seducing People from my service." He added that Dwarkanath exceeded all others in "the virulence of Refractory natives inimical to all Europeans."[29]

By his death in 1810, Dwarkanath had built a large fortune through indigo, trade, money-lending, and land purchases. The jama of his patnis (lands with permanent leases) and other estates was Rs. 3.6 lakhs and he left almost Rs.7 lakhs in other assets.[30] As parts of the Burdwan zamindari were sold for arrears, former dependents of Tejchandra were establishing themselves as independent zamindars.

Raghunath Singh, a mofussil farmer of unknown caste, similarly broke away from his close association with Tejchandra. At one time the officer in charge of Tejchandra's wardrobe, he farmed or purchased Bagri, Chandrakona, Chitua, and other southern parts of the Burdwan zamindari, often under fictitious names. He was said to have held lands with a jama of Rs. 7 lakhs in the 1790s.[31] Frequently he bought lands, withheld his revenue, and then repurchased the land under an alias.[32] When the Company arrested him in 1799 for his fraudulent manipulation of the auction process, it took seventy or eighty Company sepoys to overwhelm the twenty-five guards who protected his rambling mud house, surrounded by a ditch, near Ghatal in pargana Chitua.[33]

[27] Pramanath Barma, *Dwarkanath Babu* (Calcutta, 1294 BS), pp. 1–2 and 8–12.
[28] *BLI*, pp. 555–57.
[29] Letter from Ross Jennings, 4 March 1793, BOR Prog. of 1–28 March 1793, vol. 151.
[30] Dwarkanath's will and related legal proceedings, BOR Prog. 4–5 of 17 Aug. 1811, vol. 495.
[31] Examination of Kishormohan Mitra, BOR Prog. 18 of 10 Aug. 1819, vol. 599.
[32] Y. Burges, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 12 and 18 June 1799, *BLI*, pp. 362–64 and 367.
[33] *BLI*, pp. 395 and 403.

Thus most of the Burdwan zamindari in the 1790s was held by semi-autonomous revenue farmers who attended the raja's puniya at the start of each revenue year, paid their rents rather irregularly, but were allowed to manage their village collections with minimal interference by the zamindar.

A similar informality and looseness characterized the mustajirs' relations with their under-farmers. Some mustajirs collected part of their rents directly from villages through a *tahsildar* (collector) but most of the villages were sub-leased to kutkinadars. In 1790, the Collector reported that the farmers were in the habit of dismissing kutkinadars "at pleasure."[34] Kutkinadars in arrears were difficult to coerce. In 1792, the Company passed a regulation which enabled zamindars and mustajirs to distrain and cause to be sold the property of under-renters in arrears.[35] Hereafter, distraint of property rather than detention was the normal judicial procedure for recovering arrears from kutkinadars. But kutkinadars were generally elusive persons with little property and they often evaded legal processes. It is likely that mustajirs continued to use informal coercion against uncooperative kutkinadars. At the lower levels of the rent-collecting hierarchy, kutkinadars and head raiyats rarely retained vakils at the new courts and relied on customary force when needed.

In collecting from their villages, kutkinadars obtained the help of head raiyats by allowing them to hold their village lands at an under-rent. When the Burdwan Collector sent a sazawal to measure lands in Mandalghat which had been forfeited to government for arrears, he had the same experience as Collectors in other parts of Bengal. The sazawal measured one raiyat's land and found that he held 37 bighas although his pattas recorded only 20 bighas. "The consequence was that all the [superior] Raiyats became discontented and threatened to abscond if the measurement was not discontinued." Unless the whole village was under-assessed, the lesser raiyats were over-assessed in order to make up the deficiency in the privileged raiyats' rents.[36] The non-privileged raiyats were so short of cash that they were unable to pay the first two or three kists of the revenue year while the summer crops were ripening. They were in fact compelled to mortgage their crops to money-lenders in order to tide themselves over to harvest time in late summer.[37] In years when drought or floods damaged their crops, some kutkinadars and mustajirs suspended their demands on their under-renters. When they did, government was more willing to postpone its demand on the zamindar.[38] How often this happened is uncertain but at least in the early

[34] L. Mercer to BOR, 22 May 1790, *BLI*, p. 23.
[35] *BLR*, pp. 231 and 239.
[36] W. Brooke to BOR, 30 June 1792, BOR Prog. of 2–7 July 1792, vol. 138.
[37] S. Davis to BOR, 17 Sept. 1793, *BLI*, pp. 74–75.
[38] BOR to W. Brooke, 19 March 1792, *BLR*, p. 216.

years of the new system, the intermediaries, the zamindar, and the government were sometimes responsive to seasonal misfortunes.[39]

Now we turn to a chronological treatment of Raja Tejchandra's experience under the settlement of 1790. Tejchandra refused the Decennial Settlement when it was first offered him in the spring of 1790. He insisted that the Burdwan revenue demand was too high. Lawrence Mercer, the Collector, denied this. Mercer conceded that Tejchandra was heavily in debt and that he was having difficulty collecting from his chief farmers. However, Mercer attributed the debts to the raja's poor management. Mercer's judgments of Tejchandra were harsh and they must have been colored by the raja's repeated refusal to obey his orders and the raja's trips to Calcutta to challenge the Collector's decisions as well as by the raja's charges that the Collector's diwan and long-time assistant, Lala Roy Singh, had accepted a bribe.[40] Mercer wrote that the raja was indolent, "vicious," and "mercenary," and that "he entrusts the entire management of Business to dependents, who, if possible, are more venal than himself."[41] Specifically, Mercer charged that the Burdwan zamindari lacked systematic accounting and receipt-granting procedures so that the raja, his head farmers, and their under-farmers (kutkinadars) relied on a coercive and oppressive method of collecting from raiyats. This method consisted "of placing an unlimited number of Mohussils [peons] over the Ryots" when the superior rent collectors fell into arrears. Mercer estimated that at least 3 or 4 lakhs of rupees were spent each year in Burdwan for mohussils, a charge so large that by itself it prevented many "Farmers, under Renters and Ryots from making good their Balances."[42]

Tejchandra argued with government through most of the rainy season of 1790, refusing to enter the Decennial Settlement on the terms offered. Members of the Board of Revenue expressed doubts about Burdwan's ability to pay the assessment, doubts that were fed by the number of the raja's farmers who had been imprisoned for arrears.[43] Nevertheless, in September the Governor General in Council decided to make the settlement with revenue farmers instead of with Tejchandra. The Collector initially had a difficult time finding farmers because Tejchandra spread rumors that he would receive charge of the district after all and thereby discouraged others from making offers.[44] By November 1790, the Collector had issued ten-year leases for most of Burdwan.

The government's settlement with farmers proved to be a general failure, as its net collections declined by Rs. 4.8 lakhs in 1790-91. Many farmers fell into

[39] The government also authorized Collectors to lend money to landholders to build and renovate tanks and canals to guard against the failure of the rains. GG to BOR, 13 Jan. 1792, *BLR*, p. 211.
[40] L. Mercer to BOR, 13 Sept. 1790, *BLI*, pp. 29–30.
[41] L. Mercer to BOR, 30 Nov. 1790, BOR Prog. of 1–13 Dec. 1790, vol. 105.
[42] L. Mercer to BOR, 31 July 1790, BOR Prog. of 1–18 Oct. 1790, vol. 101.
[43] Minutes by members of BOR, BOR Prog. of 2 Oct. 1790, vol. 101.
[44] L. Mercer to BOR, 23 Sept. 1790, BOR Prog. of 17–29 Sept. 1790, vol. 100.

deep arrears during 1790-91, necessitating government coercive processes (imprisonment) against certain farmers and their securities.[45] The farmers of four large parganas were jailed for arrears in May 1791 and were still in confinement in January 1796.[46] Large farms were taken by the raja's officers and relatives so that in effect the raja appeared to remain in control of much of the zamindari. Farms with a jama of over 7 lakhs were held by the raja's mother and the widows of Raja Chitrasen, despite the regulation that forbade females from this role.[47] The widows fell into arrears and their proxies were imprisoned.[48] Mercer suspected that the raja was secretly collecting in the lands held under khas management.[49] He commented ruefully in April that in recent months, the raja had "shown more ingenuity than could have been expected from a man of his Parts."[50] In June, Tejchandra, who still owed arrears from previous years, purchased almost half of the Bishnupur zamindari at public auction in Calcutta. He paid Rs. 33,800 for land with a jama of roughly 2 lakhs. His ability to bid at all convinced the Board of Revenue that Tejchandra was in less financial trouble than he claimed.[51]

Tejchandra established an important fact following his refusal to engage for Burdwan in 1790. This was that he and his dependents were so well entrenched in Burdwan district that government would lose money, at least in the short run, if it settled the district without the raja. Government lacked the records to apportion the jama within individual parganas and many of the major farmers who might have produced the records remained loyal to the raja. Government had gained little by selling Mandalghat to recover arrears from the raja. The records delivered by the raja's officers to the new purchaser proved to be misleading and fraudulent, and purchasers soon forfeited their investment and found themselves imprisoned.[52] The next owner suffered a similar fate.[53]

Yet the point was a limited one. Tejchandra failed to convince government that his zamindari was over-assessed and deserved a revenue reduction. Government might lose current revenue by remaining firm and bringing to sale parts of the Burdwan zamindari. In the long run, Tejchandra might lose his estate.

In subsequent years, Tejchandra used his influence to scare off bidders and to repurchase some forfeited lots through the agency of his dependents. For

45 W.A. Brooke, Burdwan Col. to BOR, 15 Jan. 1793, *BLI*, pp. 33–34.
46 Robert Ireland, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 30 Jan. 1796, *BLI*, pp. 232–33.
47 BOR to GG in C, 30 May 1791, *BLR*, p. 169.
48 Hirst, "The Early Collectorate Records", p. 239.
49 BOR to L. Mercer, 30 May 1791, *BLR*, p. 168. Upon investigation it seemed that the payments were made to the raja voluntarily. BOR to L. Mercer, 25 July 1791, *BLR*, p. 173.
50 L. Mercer to BOR, 22 April 1791, BOR Prog. of 25 April 1791, vol. 110.
51 BOR to L. Mercer, 18 July 1791, *BLR*, p. 161.
52 W.A. Brooke, Burdwan Col., BOR, 28 Feb. 1793, *BLI*, pp. 36–37.
53 BOR to Brooke, 4 Jan. 1792, *BLR*, p. 207.

example, in 1791 parganas Arsa and Azmatshahi were brought to auction to recover the raja's arrears. Roughly 100 persons attended the auction but "not a single Rupee was bid."[54] However, Chitua (south of Ghatal in modern Midnapur district) was put up for sale in the same year. It was bought by a resident of Calcutta for Rs. 510 although its jama was Rs. 97,422.[55] This meant that Tejchandra lost a large pargana without appreciably reducing his arrears. Allowing lands to come to auction was a risky game. It eventually persuaded government to strengthen the zamindars' coercive powers but it did not lead to lower assessments in Burdwan or most other zamindaris. It also cost the Burdwan Raj about one third of its estate between 1789 and 1800.

In June 1791, the Governor General and his Council again decided to offer Tejchandra a long-term settlement of Burdwan, minus Mandalghat, Chitua, and those farms not in arrears whose holders wished to retain them until their leases expired in 1800. To sweeten the offer, Lord Cornwallis allowed him three years, beginning in 1792-93, to pay off his arrears of Rs.3 lakhs. Tejchandra went to Calcutta to discuss this with the Board of Revenue. When he held out for better terms, Lord Cornwallis' Council lost patience and ordered Tejchandra to be escorted out of Calcutta under a guard of peons. At this point, Tejchandra realized he had exhausted his room for maneuver. His vakil expressed "great sorrow" for the raja's "guilty and disrespectful Behavior." Tejchandra returned to Calcutta and signed the nine-year settlement.[56]

The zamindari which was settled with Tejchandra was smaller than the one he took charge of before the Decennial Settlement. He had lost Chitua and the decayed pargana of Mandalghat. He had not regained farms, with a jama of Rs. 3 lakhs, from Ramkant Roy (his mother's confidant) and others who chose not to be reincorporated into the zamindari.[57] On the other hand, he had bought land in Bishnupur with a jama of almost 2 lakhs, thereby reducing his net loss to about 10 percent in terms of revenue owed to government.[58] He had reason to be pleased for he might have forfeited much more.

On 27 October 1791, Bishnukumari, Tejchandra, and one of his wives had real cause to rejoice. His fifth wife, Nankikumari, gave birth to his only son, Pratapchandra.[59] This lessened a fear of Bishnukumari and government officers,

[54] G.C. Meyer, Preparer of Reports, to BOR, 29 April 1791, *BLR*, p. 154.

[55] Meyer to BOR, 24 May 1791, *BLR*, p. 163.

[56] BOR Prog. of 27 June 1791, vol. 114; Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, p. 27.

[57] *BLI*, pp. 422–25 and 489.

[58] BOR Prog. of 3 Aug. 1791, vol. 117. In addition to Mandalghat, Chitua, and farms retained by Decennial Settlement farmers, the Burdwan zamindari's net jama was reduced by the separation of independent taluqs (Rs.74,938) and the resumption or abolition of taxes and duties (Rs. 73,443).

[59] Charles A. Bruce, Burdwan Ag. Col., to BOR, 29 Oct. 1791. BOR Prog. of 2–18 Nov. 1791, vol. 123.

dating back to Warren Hastings in the 1770s, that the Burdwan raj might experience "a failure of inheritance."[60]

Whatever pleasure Pratapchandra's birth gave Tejchandra must have been offset by the precarious state of the zamindari and his own health. In 1791, 1792, and 1793, he fell behind in his revenue payments repeatedly. In 1791, he blamed floods for his arrears. In September 1791, the rivers rose a foot higher than in living memory, according to the embankment engineer.[61] This time government permitted an investigation but it showed the damage to the crops and the raja's rent collections was less than he had claimed and government charged him for the cost of the investigation "to deter him, as well as other landholders, from preferring such groundless claims in future."[62] In 1792, the raja narrowly avoided major additional sales and imprisonment for arrears by mortgaging land to Raja Nabakrishna to raise money for his revenue. In 1793, the raja was imprisoned for arrears and then, when he fell dangerously ill with venereal disease, he was shifted into close confinement in his own house.[63] In June and July 1793, his arrears were so heavy that government ordered the sale of one fifth of the zamindari. All his chief amla went to Calcutta to try to prevent the sales.[64] Again the raja paid up, apparently by further borrowing.[65] In January 1794, government confined the raja again. It also attached the zamindari and appointed an amin to collect rent from the raja's farmers.

The raja was now in real difficulty. He claimed that he had borrowed Rs.6,75,000 from Nimu Mallik and other Calcutta merchants in the previous year.[66] Debts were overdue and some of his creditors were preparing to seek recovery before the Supreme Court.[67] He himself was confined while some farmers were withholding rents, protected by delays in the judicial process.

Tejchandra's strategy for escaping from these mounting problems was to sell most of the zamindari to his mother. In February 1794, government approved the sale, released Tejchandra from confinement, and recognized Rani Bishnukumari as the zamindar of Burdwan. Tejchandra claimed his motive was to gain the Rs.8 lakhs purchase price so he could pay his Calcutta creditors and

60 Monckton Jones, *Hastings in Bengal*, p. 159.

61 James Parlby, Lt. of Engineers, to Charles Bruce, Burdwan Ag. Col., 26 Sept. 1791. BOR Prog. of 3–17 Oct. 1791, vol. 121.

62 GG in C to BOR, 23 Dec. 1791, *BLR*, p. 209.

63 A Company surgeon reported he "attentively examined his disorder which I found to be venerial and from Misconduct and Neglect had acquired a great degree of Virulence ... and otherwise affected his General health." W. Williams, Surgeon, to W.A. Brooke, Burdwan Ag. Col., 23 April 1793, BOR Prog. of 26 April 1793, vol. 153.

64 S. Davis, Burdwan Col. to BOR, 21 June and 17 July 1793, *BLI*, pp. 54–55 and 61.

65 S. Davis to BOR, 2 Aug. 1793, *BLI*, p. 67.

66 Letter from Tejchandra, enclosure to S. Davis to BOR, 13 Jan. 1794, *BLI*, p. 95.

67 Letter from Tejchandra, BOR Prog. of 18–29 Oct. 1793, vol. 166.

thus save his family's estate.[68] Samuel Davis, the Collector, was skeptical. He thought the raja hoped to escape confinement, "embezzle" from the collections, repurchase under-rated lands brought to auction, and secretly continue managing the zamindari.[69]

Why did the hapless Rani Bishnukumari agree to buy the Burdwan zamindari in such unfavorable circumstances? She was aged, had never proven herself knowledgeable of zamindari management, and had not even lived at Burdwan for many years. Most of the major farmers were loyal to Tejchandra and not to her and Ramkant Roy. Moreover, the rani would face the same problem in collecting from the ninety-two farms, covering 4,800 square miles, that had frustrated Tejchandra. This problem was that many farmers had given multi-year, collusive, and preferential leases to their under-farmers. Tejchandra must have known, when he transferred the zamindari to his mother, that under-valued leases and her lack of recent experience in managing the Burdwan zamindari would lead to heavy arrears.

Her motives, like Tejchandra's were obscure. The most plausible explanation is that she agreed in order to recover ownership of the Dewry Mahals. Tejchandra had offered to separate the Dewry Mahals from the zamindari and transfer them to her as a gift. The mahals contained "the best lands from almost every Pergunnah in the District."[70] She had long coveted them, claiming they belonged to her, as the senior rani, and not to the zamindari. Presumably, Ramkant Roy and her other advisers also encouraged her to accept Tejchandra's offer so they might profit from managing the zamindari.

Within a month of the government's approval of the transfer of the zamindari to Bishnukumari, she was Rs.6 lakhs in arrears and she had "withdrawn from business and retired" from Burdwan to her house at Amboa (Kalna). Davis and the Board of Revenue suspected that Tejchandra had himself collected several lakhs from the Paus (December–January) kist.[71]

The government ordered the sale of the Dewry Mahals to make good the arrears. The permanent loss of these 789 villages would have been a financial disaster to the Burdwan raj family. They contained lands held since Mughal times on *mukarari* (fixed jama) grants. A Burdwan Collector had advised against selling them in 1790 on the grounds that they were such a profitable cushion that their loss might prevent Tejchandra from meeting his obligations on the remainder of the estate.[72] They also included the family's Amboa

68 Letter from Tejchandra, BOR Prog. of 18–29 Oct. 1793, vol. 166.

69 S. Davis to BOR, 27 Feb. 1794, *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. II, App. 6. pp. 552–54.

70 L. Mercer to BOR, 16 April 1790, BOR Prog. of 19–30 April 1790, vol. 90.

71 S. Davis to BOR, 27 Feb. 1794, *BLI*, p. 106; BOR to GG, 20 May 1794, BOR Prog. of 20–30 May 1794, vol. 178.

72 L. Mercer to BOR, 16 April 1790, BOR Prog. of 19–30 April 1790, vol. 90.

residences and temples although that area was exempted when the Dewry Mahals were eventually brought to auction in late 1794. Before putting the mahals up for sale, the government asked the Collector to examine the mofussil records in order to determine if the jama, as it suspected, was under-rated. The Collector summoned 300 patwaris in the Dewry Mahals to appear at Burdwan and Amboa with their accounts. Only twenty-five obeyed. The Collector thought that Tejchandra, then at Amboa, was colluding with his mother and that he was responsible for the patwaris' non-cooperation.[73] Therefore in June 1794, the Company ordered Tejchandra out of the district and attached the whole zamindari. He went to Chandanagar and petitioned government to have the sale to his mother annulled. He said that she had not paid him any of the purchase price and that he had made the sale on the bad advice of Buddan Mitra, one of his chief amla, whom he had since discovered "possesses the very worst of Hearts" and was cooperating with the rani's manager, Ramkant Roy, against Tejchandra's interests.[74]

The raja also filed a suit in the Diwani Adalat to have his sale of the zamindari annulled on the grounds that Rani Bishnukumari had failed to pay the purchase price. Although the suit did not restore the estate to Tejchandra, initiating it proved advantageous. Because the pending litigation indicated uncertainty about ownership, Joseph Baretto, an indigo planter, and the merchants from whom the rani was trying to borrow money, refused to lend and this led her to seek a compromise with her son.[75] As a result, when the Collector took over the management of the Burdwan zamindari in the summer of 1794, both Tejchandra and Bishnukumari acquiesced.

Samuel Davis' management in 1794-95 succeeded financially, giving strong support to the contention of the Board of Revenue and previous Collectors that Burdwan was not over-assessed, only poorly managed. Not only did Davis collect almost the entire jama promptly, he arrested and imprisoned only six persons for arrears.[76] If he used other forms of coercion, apart from ordering Tejchandra to leave the district for two months,[77] it did not show in his correspondence. Although Burdwan district land with a jama of over Rs.6 lakhs was sold during Davis' year of management, almost all of it was for arrears accumulated in the previous year. In the year following his management, remarkably, no Burdwan lands were sold for arrears.[78]

Government did respond favorably to Tejchandra's complaints about his

[73] S. Davis to BOR, 13 May 1794, *BLI*, pp. 117–18.
[74] Tejchandra's petition, received 5 July 1794, JP, Civil, Prog. 10 of 11 July 1794, vol. 7.
[75] S. Davis to BOR, 14 Aug. 1794, *BLI*, pp. 137–40.
[76] S. Davis to John Lumsden, Burdwan Judge and Mag., 14 May 1795, *BLI*, p. 203.
[77] S. Davis to BOR, 14 Aug. 1794, *BLI*, pp. 137–40.
[78] Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, App. B. Also, *BLI*, p. 463.

inability to coerce prompt payments from his farmers. At Samuel Davis' urging, it passed a new Regulation (XXXV) in March 1795 which enabled zamindars to distrain the property of a defaulting tenant without a Judge's order.[79] Step by step, government was providing zamindars with expanded powers of coercion so that zamindars might collect their rents with the same promptness with which government required zamindars to pay. When Davis reported that 30,000 suits were pending in the Burdwan courts, he observed that it would take eight or more years to clear the cases already filed. In the Bishnupur parganas of Burdwan district, the kutkinadars were withholding their rents in the knowledge that it would take years before decisions would be reached in the suits against them.[80] The problem was not as serious among the kutkinadars within the older parts of the Burdwan zamindari, where traditional deference still operated.

Why was the Collector of Burdwan, even before the new regulation, able to collect rents from the Burdwan mustajirs while the zamindar had failed? Davis found that in recent years, in their efforts to persuade the government that Burdwan was over-assessed, the zamindari amla had reduced the zamindar's demand on individual farmers, at least in the records, and had made verbal agreements to receive secret payments in order to create the impression that the zamindari's assets were inadequate to the government's demand. The Collector thought that this was probably the reason why the estate's recorded income had declined by Rs.1.2 lakhs in the three years prior to the sale to the rani and why the rani fell into heavy arrears.[81] During his management, Davis canceled fraudulent leases, resettled farms whose leases had expired, and thus raised the collections from the mofussil.[82]

Rani Bishnukumari at first complained about Davis' management. But by the middle of the 1794-95 revenue year, far from being displeased with Davis, she was petitioning government to allow Davis to manage her estate again in 1795-96.[83] Bishnukumari appreciated Davis' success in bringing the mofussil settlement back up to a profitable level. The Burdwan raj was growing accustomed to European services. Through most of the 1790s, it contracted the repairs of river embankments with Europeans.

Government turned down the rani's request to allow Davis to manage Burdwan for another year and it reinstated her as zamindar in May 1795.[84] Rani Bishnukumari and her manager, Ramkant Roy, administered the Burdwan zamindari for the last time from May 1795 until November 1798. Her final years

79 Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, pp. 54–55. Also, JP, Civil, Prog. of 27 March 1795, vol. 11.
80 S. Davis to BOR, 27 Feb. 1795, *BLI*, pp. 183–84.
81 S. Davis to BOR, 14 Aug. 1794, *BLI*, pp. 137–40.
82 Ibid., Also, Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, p. 29.
83 GG in C to BOR, 19 Dec. 1794, *BLR*, pp. 338–39.
84 *BLI*, p. 203.

were beset with family and financial problems. She and Tejchandra resumed their competition for dominance. Tejchandra possessed his own sizeable zamindari which was entirely separate from the Burdwan zamindari. It consisted of lands he had purchased in Bishnupur and a prized estate known as Kasipur, with a jama of Rs.3.5 lakhs, between Burdwan town and the Bhagirathi river. It contained *mahattaran* (land given free of revenue to respectable non-Brahmins) which had originally belonged to Diwan Manikchandra but had been resumed by Raja Tilakchandra. It provided a sister and five wives of Tejchandra with Rs. 18-19,000 per year.[85] Tejchandra also obtained most of the Dewry Mahals in 1795 when they were sold to recover Bishnukumari's arrears. There is nothing to indicate that she was pleased her son gained possession of the Dewry Mahals. Rather, relations between mother and son degenerated as they petitioned and filed law suits against each other. Bishnukumari charged that Tejchandra's employees were altering her tenants' leases, thereby lowering her rental income; that they removed the roof of her kachari;[86] and that one of her major farmers, Buddan Mitra, who was Tejchandra's adviser, withheld Rs.71,847 in order to force the sale of the rani's lands.[87] Tejchandra's countered with charges that the rani's servants prevented his tenants from cutting their crops in his purchased Dewry Mahals and created "great disturbance" to prevent him from taking possession.[88] The raja and his mother also disputed "very strenuously" the ownership of the Sarbamangala temple in Burdwan town.[89] The Collector, Robert Ireland, believed that Tejchandra was conspiring with the rani's farmers in order to bring her lands to sale and when her arrears approached Rs. 7 lakhs he asked the Board of Revenue to expel the raja from the district.[90] The Board refused, observing the rani could file suits against the farmers with arrears.[91] The rani was almost always in substantial arrears during the last three years of her life. She was forced to borrow from private creditors and to file many suits against her farmers.[92] In 1797, she lost land with a jama of Rs.6.3 lakhs but she repurchased benami almost all of it through Ramkant Roy's relatives and dependents.[93]

Another method used by the rani to obtain money for her arrears was to separate revenue-paying land from her estate and rent the land for a small sum

[85] *BLI*, pp. 125 and 134–35.
[86] R. Ireland, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 18 Jan. 1796, *BLI*, p. 229.
[87] R. Ireland to BOR, 20 April 1796, *BLI*, p. 278.
[88] BOR to R. Ireland, 5 Feb. 1796, *BLR*, pp. 507–8, and Ireland to Thomas Pattle, Burdwan Judge and Mag., 20 May 1796, *BLI*, p. 246.
[89] Thomas Pattle to R. Ireland, 19 April 1796, *BLR*, p. 472.
[90] R. Ireland to BOR, 17 Feb. 1797, *BLI*, p. 269.
[91] BOR to R. Ireland, 24 Jan. and 21 Feb. 1797, *BLR*, pp. 584 and 588.
[92] R. Ireland to BOR, 17 April and 6 May 1796, *BLI*, pp. 240 and 243.
[93] Ray, *Change*, p. 101.

as if it were waste land for development, in return for a lump sum payment. She did this with Raghunath Singh, Tejchandra's former associate. She was in arrears of Rs.1.72 lakhs. She detached from the zamindari eighty-seven villages near Chandrakona with a jama of Rs. 60,000 and leased them as undeveloped lands to Raghunath Singh at a jama of Rs. 15,062. As compensation for this under-rated land, Raghunath paid her Rs.1.71 lakhs with which she paid off her arrears.[94] Such an expedient provided ready cash but reduced the regular mofussil assets of the zamindari.

The painful, protracted struggle between mother and son ended when Bishnukumari died at Amboa on 8 November 1798.[95] Her zamindari was inherited by Tejchandra. In the months following Bishnukumari's death, an unprecedented amount of land in Burdwan district was brought to sale. Despite a good harvest in late 1798,[96] lands with a jama of over Rs. 20 lakhs, including large parts of the Burdwan zamindari, were sold for arrears.[97] The explanation for the heavy arrears seems to have been that Tejchandra deliberately fell behind in his payments in order to rid himself of some of the farmers, including Ramkant Roy and his dependents, who held multi-year leases granted by Bishnukumari. The leases on auctioned land were canceled and then zamindars often repurchased the lands benami, unencumbered by the old leases to farmers and under-renters. In 1799 and 1800, Tejchandra repurchased much of the land brought to sale. Tejchandra's sixth wife, Rani Kamalakumari, emerged as the nominal owner of land with a jama of almost Rs. 10 lakhs.[98] The Collector suspected that at one auction at which land was purchased by the rani, the raja's influence prevented any other bidders from competing.[99] Despite the record level of sales, the Burdwan zamindari suffered little damage.

From 1800, the Burdwan raj entered a more stable phase. Tejchandra was free of the quarrels with his mother and her adviser, Ramkant Roy. He presided over a zamindari with a jama of Rs. 26.4 lakhs, a third smaller and perhaps more manageable than the one he took over in 1786 when he came of age. His zamindari consisted of both the estate left by his mother and the estates he had purchased, with a jama of Rs. 5.4 lakhs, during the time his mother was zamindar.[100] It also included Bhursut and thirty other farms, which had been let

94 Rani's petition, 6 March 1797, Jud. Prog., Civil, Prog. 14 of 14 Sept. 1798, vol 46.

95 Burdwan district seems to have been struck by a virulent fever in 1798–99. Burdwan's Judge (James Spottiswoode), the Collector (Robert Ireland), and the Superintendent of Pulbandi Repairs (James Thompson) died and the other Judge (Charles Bruce at Hughli) resigned due to ill health, all between October 1798 and May 1799.

96 BLR, p. 802; *BLI*, p. 352.

97 Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, App. B.

98 Y. Burges, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 12 May 1800, *BLI*, p. 424.

99 Y. Burges to BOR, 25 May 1799, *BLI*, p. 359.

100 His Kasipur estate had a jama of Rs. 3,52,389 and his Barahazari estate in Bishnupur paid a jama of Rs. 1,91,272.

to farmers in 1790 for ten years, with a jama of Rs.2.8 lakhs, and which the Company returned to him in 1800 when the leases expired.[101]

After the volume of sales in Burdwan had peaked at over Rs.20 lakhs in 1798-99, auction sales fell off markedly and did not exceed Rs. 2.13 lakhs (jama) once in the next twenty years. From 1794-95 to 1798-99, lands with a jama of Rs. 40.97 lakhs had been auctioned; in the next five years the total was Rs. 4.11 lakhs. In Bengal as a whole, the pattern was similar. The year 1798-99 set the record with sales of Rs. 36.85 lakhs (equal to 19.37 percent of the jama of Bengal) and then declined in six of the next seven years.[102]

Why did government sales fall so dramatically after 1798-99 in Burdwan and elsewhere? Numerous factors were involved. The first nine years following the Decennial Settlement of 1790 was a shake-out period in which large, inefficient, and over-assessed landholders lost land. By the end of the century, surviving landholders were adapting to the new regularity and were utilizing the expanded judicial system to secure their rents. The price of rice increased at the turn of the century, putting more money in the hands of superior raiyats, tenure-holders, and proprietors. Another crucial factor seems to have been the passage of a new judicial regulation in 1799.

In 1799, the Company was pressed for money to pay for its expedition against Tipu Sultan of Mysore. In Bengal, its land revenue situation was deteriorating. In five consecutive years, the jama of land advertised for sale for arrears had grown while the auction prices received, from which arrears were recovered, were declining.[103] Two things were evident. Landholders were manipulating the sales by deliberately falling into arrears and then buying their land back benami in an effort to escape paying their arrears. Benami sales had become endemic and perhaps nowhere more than in Burdwan district where sales far exceeded the Bengal average.[104] Secondly, many proprietors seemed to be having genuine difficulty in collecting rent from their farmers who in turn were facing trouble from their under-farmers and raiyats.

The government's solution to this twin problem was the infamous Regulation VII of 1799, known as the *Haftam* (seventh) Regulation. It made benami transfers of land subject to forfeit to government. And, more importantly, it provided proprietors and farmers with summary powers to sell the property of tenants who were in arrears in their rent. Regulation XXXV of 1795 had armed them with summary powers of distraining their tenants' property but it required

[101] Y. Burges to BOR, 12 May 1800, *BLI*, p. 424.
[102] Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, App. B.
[103] Ibid., App. B and 3.
[104] Ibid., App. B, shows that between 1794 and 1819, while land with a jama equal to 68.2 percent of Bengal's annual jama was publicly sold for arrears in Bengal as a whole, the percentage sold in Burdwan was 104.49 percent.

a time-consuming judicial process to bring distrained property to sale. Regulation VII of 1799 removed that obstacle. It also stripped raiyats of part of the judicial protection against unfair demands for rent and left them with the need to file a judicial suit to recover property unfairly and summarily distrained and sold. Regulation VII of 1799 tipped the balance of power in agrarian relations towards superior landholders and enabled both them and the government to collect the revenue with greater promptness.[105]

Regulation VII made a mockery of Lord Cornwallis' 1793 justification of the Permanent Settlement. He had argued that the permanent limitation of the state's demand, together with the rule of law, would "establish security of person and property." "A spirit of industry has been implanted in man, that in seeking his own good he may contribute to the public prosperity. The Husbandman and Manufacturer will toil incessantly if they are permitted to reap the profit of their labor; they will render a country rich and powerful, if the Government under which they live will only afford them protection."[106] Regulation VII of 1799 afforded zamindars and farmers with protection while it rendered many husbandmen – the people who "incessantly" provided the labor – defenseless. It was a significant victory for the zamindars as the rapid decline in auction sales indicated.

[105] Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, pp. 61–64; Ray, *Change*, p. 87; and Sinha, *Economic History*, vol. II, p. 171.

[106] Minute by GG, 11 Feb. 1793, *British Parliamentary Papers: Colonies, East India*, vol. 1, App. 9A, p. 341.

16 Patnis and the elusive quest for independence and security

Before the Decennial and Permanent Settlements, the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the modern districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, Howrah, and Hughli had lived under one of three kortas or masters: the rajas of Birbhum, Bishnupur, or Burdwan. Subordination to a major zamindar was part of the natural order. These three zamindars and their amla had dominated their territories, although with decreasing autonomy since 1757, and had distributed rent-collecting rights among their principal subjects. They had performed useful functions for the local gentry and the rest of the subordinate population. They stood between the state and their subjects and pleaded with the state when seasonal calamities prevented renters from meeting the state's demands. In years of poor harvests, the zamindars reduced their collections and borrowed from bankers or even spent their moshaira to pay the district's revenue. The zamindars commanded the local militia which escorted treasure, guarded the kacharis, broke up local combinations against rent demands, and drove off the chuar incursions from the western hills. They appointed the village chaukidars and paiks who aided in rent collection and village law enforcement. They supervised courts in which disputes over property and violation of behavioral norms were adjudicated. They gave rent-free land to Brahmins who performed the necessary rituals, upheld the rules of civilized behavior, and taught reading and accounting. They employed local persons to manage the collections and work in the zamindari offices. The beneficiaries of zamindari favoritism and patronage included corrupt, oppressive, and violent people but at least they were usually members of the communities in which they worked and therefore were subject to corrective community pressures. Arguably, most residents of the western zamindaris were likely to have preferred zamindari institutions to appointees from Murshidabad or Calcutta.

The reforms introduced by the Company had gradually pared away elements of zamindari sovereignty. Company administrators intruded frequently in the management of the revenue collections, impeded the alienation of land to zamindari favorites, and dismissed large contingents of zamindari militia. The Shore-Cornwallis reforms brought district police under Company control,

created a Company mofussil judicial system, and abolished zamindari duties on trade and the professions. The Company employed convicts to build roads, supervised the repair of river embankments, and encouraged the cultivation of cash crops such as indigo, potatoes, and sugar.[1] As Company administration reached further into the mofussil, the governing role of the zamindars shrank. Zamindars had less patronage to dispense, less protection to offer, less power for local people to fear, admire, or solicit. Even in the one area for which zamindars retained primary responsibility – revenue collection – zamindari discretionary power was declining. The inflexibility of the revenue demand and the new judicial regulations left zamindars with less discretion about how much rent to charge, about what forms of duress to apply. The territories once monopolized by the zamindars were much more widely distributed. Where one zamindar had presided in the 1780s, dozens or hundreds stood following the partitions and auction sales of the 1790s. By 1806, the rajas of Birbhum and Bishnupur were virtually landless and the raja of Burdwan had lost about one third of his zamindari. Company policy sought to broaden landholding on the assumption that small landlords would develop their holdings more efficiently than large ones. In western Bengal, auctions were the main vehicle of dispersion. In the east, the Company permitted taluqdars to separate from zamindari estates. In Dacca district, for example, 14,500 taluqs (dependencies) separated from 394 zamindaris; in Jessore, 3,444 taluqs separated from 122 zamindaris.[2] Creation of new, smaller zamindaris was the order of the day. And the Collector's office and the Judge's and munsif's courts, rather than the zamindar's kachari, were increasingly the places to seek redress of grievances.

While the institutional opportunities for zamindari beneficence and patronage were curtailed, the urge to occupy the kingly role was undiminished. The role was culturally familiar and historically sanctioned. To be master in one's estate, to build temples and feast Brahmins and other guests, and to distribute intermediate rent-collecting rights to loyal gentry – these still exercised a powerful appeal. The auction sales of the 1790s had shaken out the most over-assessed, inefficient, and over-indulgent zamindars. The 1799 legislation had enabled zamindars with sufficient ruthlessness to summarily arrest or distrain the possessions of raiyats in arrears.

Demographic and economic trends also favored those in a position to live off rent collection. Several indices indicated the improving economic prospects of well-positioned people to make money from rents at the start of the nineteenth century. Most importantly, agricultural rents were rising. The Burdwan Judge estimated in 1814 that the Burdwan raiyats' rental rates were "more than

[1] See *BLR*, pp. 224, 311, 594–95, and 794.
[2] Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, p. 39.

double" what they had been a decade earlier.[3] The Hughli Judge thought in 1828 that Hughli district rents had tripled since 1793.[4] Officials in other parts of Bengal reported similar increases. The growth in rents was a function of the augmented legal powers given to rent collectors, population growth, and perhaps the decline in demand for Bengal's textile production which forced artisans into agriculture. Sir William Jones had estimated the population of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa at about 22 million in 1787; Collectors and Judges returned estimates of 27 million in 1802; William Adam estimated it at 36 million in 1835; and the first systematic census showed it to be 67 million in 1872.[5] The growing competition between cultivators and the security of rental incomes were reflected in the prices people were willing to pay for land forfeited to government for arrears. The average price of land paid at public auctions in Bengal rose almost 500 percent between 1798-99 and 1809-10.[6] An added incentive to own land was the possibility of trading export crops gathered through produce rents and money-lending activities. The value of goods delivered from the interior to Calcutta "mainly for export" abroad grew by 247 percent between 1795 and 1812-13 and then more than doubled again by 1828.[7]

The signs of new wealth were common in the giant Burdwan district, which at the start of the century had a population of about 3 million.[8] Cultivation had been extended by an estimated one eighth since 1790 and perhaps only one eighth of the arable land remained untilled.[9] New villages were being formed. Brick structures "both for religious and domestic purposes" were "daily increasing." Merchants were among the most affluent residents of the district and, along with "service" people, were the principal purchasers at government auction sales.[10]

The eastern parts of the Burdwan zamindari, located in eastern Burdwan district and the modern districts of Hughli and Howrah, were well positioned to profit from the reviving trade by virtue of their proximity to the Bhagirathi or Hughli river and the Calcutta market. Before Hughli district was split off from Burdwan in 1820, most of Burdwan district's exports of rice, tobacco,

3 N.J. Halhed, Burdwan Judge and Mag., Report on Burdwan district, 31 May 1814, JP. Civil, Prog. 18 of 12 Aug. 1817, vol. 261.

4 D.C. Smyth, Hughli Judge, to Jud. Dept., 23 Feb. 1828, TR Prog. 4 of 29 Jan. 1833, vol. 880.

5 C.D. Field, *Landholding and the Relation of Landlord and Tenant in Various Countries* (2nd edn., Calcutta, 1885), p. 557.

6 That is, the price of land in relation to government demand. Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, app. 3.

7 Amales Tripathi, *Trade and Finance in the Bengal Presidency, 1793–1833* (Calcutta, 1979), p. 209.

8 E. Thompson, Burdwan Judge and Mag., to Jud. Dept., 9 March 1802, *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. II, p. 627, and Thomas Brooke, Hughli Judge and Mag., to Jud. Dept., 3 May 1802, JP, Civil, Prog. 52 of 8 July 1802, vol. 72.

9 J. Sherburne, Burdwan Col., to Jud. Dept., 20 Oct. 1801, JP, Civil, Prog. 83 of 8 July 1802, vol. 74.

10 E. Thompson, Burdwan Judge and Mag., to Jud. Dept., 9 March 1802, pp. 624–25 and 627.

sugar, indigo, and cotton goods from the eastern parganas were shipped through the ports of Hughli, Kalna, and Katwa. Kalna in 1802 was described as "always crowded with boats; and is the great Mart not only for Burdwan, but for all of the Western Provinces."[11] Kalna had long been of special importance to the Burdwan raj family, being the residence of widowed ranis and the site of principal family temples. In the early 1800s, Tejchandra was considering making it his main residence too and was engaged in private and public building projects there, including the 109 Shiva *linga* (phallic symbol) temples completed in 1809. In 1813, following an outbreak of dakaitis near Kalna, the raja and other prominent people agreed to subscribe to a fund to hire chaukidars to protect the inhabitants.[12] In the same year, he approached the government with a proposal to raise and widen the road-bed and construct thirty-six bridges and eighty-two drains on the 37 mile Burdwan-Kalna road, with the government providing convict labor and the raja paying the remaining costs of Rs. 16,000.[13] In 1819, however, the road remained almost impassable during the rainy season although it was carrying perhaps Rs. 60 lakhs of goods each year on bullocks and carts. Raja Pratapchandra, Tejchandra's son, wanted to convert the Banka river, which originated near Burdwan town, flowed eastwards, and entered the Hughli river near Kalna, into a navigable waterway. The raja thought that this would stimulate the commerce in his new bazar at Radhaganj, in Burdwan town. He was contributing to the building of a seven-arch bridge over the Banka. The Collector recommended that the government should assist the raja with the Banka navigation project which he said, "exhibits an instance of public spirit on the part of the Rajah rarely to be met with in the zamindar of these provinces."[14]

While the Burdwan raj family and the mofussil gentry promoted commercial development of the eastern parganas, the central and western areas of Burdwan lagged behind. Profitable export of products from the central and western parts of Burdwan district required improvement of the roads. By 1802, convict labor had improved the roads leading from Burdwan town to the three major ports of Hughli, Kalna, and Katwa.[15] In 1802, government completed a major bridge, costing Rs. 20,000, over the Banka river at Burdwan town and in its first month over 3,000 bullocks crossed it. But until the decayed bridges were restored

[11] Thomas Robertson, Capt. of Engineers, to William Parker, Burdwan Col., 10 March 1802, BOR Prog. 15 of 23 April 1802, vol. 355.

[12] W.B. Bayley, Burdwan Mag., to Ch. Sec., Govt., 18 Nov. 1813, JP, Crim., Prog. 15 of 27 Nov. 1813, vol. 325.

[13] W.B. Bayley, Burdwan Mag., to Register, SDA, 22 June 1813, JP, Crim., Prog. 2 of 3 July 1813, vol. 318.

[14] J.E. Elliot, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 26 July 1819, BOR Prog. 7 of 10 Aug. 1819, vol. 599.

[15] E. Thompson, Burdwan Judge and Mag., to Jud. Dept., 9 March 1802, *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. II, p. 628.

between Burdwan and the Hughli river, wheeled transport could not use the improved roads during much of the year, making it uneconomical to export a cash crop such as sugar from the distant interior.[16]

Burdwan zamindari income remained mostly dependent on agricultural rents, even as the raj family diversified its economic interests by investing in government securities, collecting groundrents in its Burdwan bazar and its newly purchased China bazar in Calcutta,[17] and surreptitiously selling wine.[18] Collecting agricultural rents posed formidable managerial and legal problems during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The Burdwan raja stood at the apex of the rent-collection hierarchy that reached down into over 8,000 villages. Until 1800, the raja continued to hold informal auctions for the sale of farming contracts, typically for three, four, or five years. The Burdwan Collector thought his profits on his rents were no more than 5 percent which he believed to be much less than in those parts of the Burdwan zamindari sold to auction purchasers, who had introduced "a more active system of management."[19]

The Burdwan raja entered into written agreements with the mustajirs, the sadr farmers. They in turn auctioned or rented their land to sub-farmers. But at this level and below, the agreements were vague and the record keeping was loose and unreliable. A written engagement with "the cultivator, or heads of a village, is scarcely known, except the general one, mutually to receive and pay, agreeably to past and preceding years." The zamindari was so vast and the raja's management techniques so casual that the raja kept no records of what the farmers' dependents had agreed to pay. This enabled the farmers who did not expect to have their contracts renewed to falsify their accounts and documents at the end of their leases. These farmers attempted to increase their profits before their leases expired by accepting payments from principal raiyats and their sub-farmers in return for granting fake and unsanctioned rent-free or *kum* (low) jama leases and for falsifying village rental records and individual receipts and pattas. "Every farmer," reported the Judge and Magistrate in Burdwan in 1802, made "himself a rent-free land-holder during the period of his farm; but the fraud is not easily detected, where there is no record either in the zemindarry or in the offices of government, where it can be ascertained" which grants were legal and which not.[20] The Collector estimated that a quarter of the agricultural produce in the district came from rent-free land.[21] Many of the exemptions from rent were illegal, not having been granted by the state or the zamindar.

16 Thomas Robertson to William Parker, 10 March 1802.
17 Ray, *Change*, p. 99; Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, p. 219.
18 J.E. Elliot, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 30 March 1820, BOR Prog. 9 of 7 April 1820, vol. 608.
19 J. Sherburne, Burdwan Col., to Jud. Dept., 29 Oct. 1801, JP, Civil, Prog. 83 of 8 July 1802, vol. 74.
20 E. Thompson, Burdwan Judge and Mag., to Jud. Dept., 9 March 1802, p. 620.
21 J. Sherburne to Jud. Dept., 29 Oct. 1801.

The succeeding farmer entered into an agreement with the zamindar to collect a fixed amount but without having in his possession a reliable record of what individual villagers owed. The Burdwan zamindar knew that the rent rolls of each farm were false and "never attempts to call for them, at the expiration of the lease."[22] The new farmer tried to uncover his predecessor's frauds and rebuild the village's assets to their rated value by measurement of individual holdings, summary arrests and distraints, regular law suits, coercion by his peons, threats, and conciliatory bargains with the jotdars or principal raiyats. If he failed, he would abscond to avoid arrest by the courts on the complaint of the landlord.

There are no statistics which show how common this pattern was. Zamindars had a motive to exaggerate the perfidy of their intermediaries. If they could convince government that the farmers were responsible for their arrears, government might legislate more coercive power for the proprietors, as it did in 1799. But arrears in large zamindaris and the testimony of government officers demonstrated that the problem was substantial. In 1802, the two most common types of suits in Burdwan district courts were over allegedly fraudulent alienations of rental land made since the Decennial Settlement and arrears of rent claimed by the farmers.[23] The summary powers of arrest and distraint in Regulation VII of 1799 were effective against raiyats but often not against intermediate tenure-holders. Raiyats had crops that could be cut or seized and their labor tied them to their villages so that when a landholder instituted summary procedures, the munsifs could easily locate the raiyat, his crops, and his livestock. Intermediaries, on the other hand, generally had few cattle or crops, their collections were in easily hidden cash and not in kind, their personal possessions were rarely of significant value, and they absconded when arrest procedures were applied for.[24] In 1819, it was reported that in the Burdwan court's jurisdiction, two out of one hundred arrest warrants secured by the raja were "the most that are ever" executed.[25]

In 1800 or 1801, Raja Tejchandra and his amla discovered what they saw as a potential solution to the problem of farmers who created beneficial interests in their taluqs at the expiry of their leases. The solution was the introduction of a new perpetual tenure called the patni taluq. Tejchandra adopted the patni tenure throughout his zamindari. It soon spread from the Burdwan zamindari to other parts of Bengal and became a common feature of tenurial relations throughout western Bengal. It was controversial among Company servants who

22 E. Thompson to Jud. Dept., 9 March 1802, p. 620.
23 Ibid., pp. 620–21.
24 Extract of J.H. Ernst, Boosnah Com., to BOR, 13 June 1798, BOR Prog. 76 of 2 July 1799, vol. 286.
25 H.T. Prinsep, "Memorandum for a Regulation in regard to Putnee Talookdars & ca.," 12 July 1819, JP, Civil, Prog. 37 of 8 Oct. 1819, vol. 271.

blamed it for the growth of rack-renting. The patni system indicated that the Permanent Settlement had failed to produce improving landlords and instead had promoted parasitical landlordism or a growth-retarding form of rental capitalism.

The patni lease reserved to the zamindar a stipulated and unalterable rent but gave the patnidar full and permanent rights to the remaining profits, with the power to sell, mortgage, and pass the patni (also *pattani*) on through inheritance.[26] The origin of the term patni is uncertain and it did not appear in early Bengali dictionaries. Among the possible origins is patta or lease. S.B. Chaudhuri, after reviewing the possibilities, opted for a derivation from the Sanskrit *pat* (to fall) or as "something which falls or is derived from another." Thus, he believed a patni taluq developed from the parent zamindari.[27] This theory is at least consistent with its meaning.

The obvious difference between patni and ordinary tenures was that the patnidar's title and rent obligation were both permanent, as long as the full rent was paid. A second difference was that the patnidar was required to state in his initial kabuliyat or agreement that if he was in arrears at the close of the year, the taluq would revert to Tejchandra. The patnidar agreed to "make no complaint concerning the Jumma either in consequence of the diminution or want of assets, by reasons of the bursting of embankments, wet, drought, or other losses."[28] Tejchandra was imposing the same harsh conditions on his renters that government had imposed on the zamindars. Another crucial difference between patnis and ordinary leases was that Tejchandra charged a fine or premium for granting the lease which may be viewed as "the capitalized value of many years' increased rents" which he might have collected if he had not granted a perpetual lease.[29]

With the exception of the alienation of future rent increases, the patni leases offered Tejchandra major benefits. The leases' permanence would in theory remove the incentive for his renters to alienate rental land[30] and encourage them to resume invalid rent-free or under-rated tenures and to encourage cultivators to settle permanently in his taluq. More importantly, patnidars would pay their rents in timely fashion or forfeit their *whole* taluq[31] and purchase price. In other

26 The authoritative account of the origin and working of the patni system is the memorandum by H.T. Prinsep, Superintendent and Remembrancer of Legal Affairs, 12 July 1819, ibid.

27 S.B. Chaudhuri, "Pattani (*Putnee*) Tenures," *Calcutta Review*, vol. 62 (1876), pp. 349–50.

28 Quoted from kabuliyat addressed by a patnidar to a zamindar. Draft of patni regulation prepared by the Judges of the SDA, JP, Civil, Prog. 28 of 8 Oct. 1819, vol. 271.

29 Atul Chandra Guha, *A Brief Sketch of the Land Systems of Bengal and Behar* (Calcutta, 1915), p. 49.

30 Raja Pratapchandra was explicit that this was a major motive for introducing the patni system. Petition of Pratapchandra, JP, Civil, Prog. 7 of 16 Sept. 1817, vol. 263.

31 In contrast to auctions for arrears to government, in which only land in proportion to the arrears was sold.

words, Tejchandra was applying the same logic used by the Company when it made its settlement permanent. The resulting prompt payments would free Tejchandra from anxiety, arrears, and litigation that traditionally marked the transition between one temporary farmer and the next. The promise of permanence would make it easier to attract more reliable taluqdars – a problem which had dogged Tejchandra in the past. And the premiums he collected would give him a reserve with which to pay future arrears and invest in new estates or other ventures. The premiums he obtained averaged about a quarter of each taluq's annual rental.[32] Thus, in theory the patni system appeared to be an inspired solution to the problem of temporary farmers who diminished the mofussil assets of their taluqs by falsifying their agreements with subordinate renters before surrendering possession. What remained to be seen was whether the new patnidars could collect enough to cover the premiums they had paid to Tejchandra, without resort to similar sale of perpetual sub-lease to sub-renters.

Also uncertain was whether Company courts would uphold the legality of the Burdwan raj's innovation. The most glaring obstacle was the regulation (XIV of 1793) that forbade landholders from granting leases that exceeded ten years. The patni system was in direct violation of that regulation. Tejchandra and his amla wisely did not seek government legal advice or permission before initiating patnis. They acted unilaterally and then watched an uncertain and divided judiciary cope with the results. Initially, Company revenue authorities did not challenge the patni lease. On the contrary, in 1810 the government began to require the zamindar to apply to it for permission to sell a patni that was in arrears. In 1812, the government passed a new regulation legalizing perpetual leases.[33]

Thus, beginning in 1801 or so, Tejchandra began auctioning off his zamindari in perpetual leases, surrendering all his property rights in his rental lands, apart from the rent reserved. For the first six years, the auctions were conducted in the zamindari kachari; after the kachari was closed, they were held in the rajbari (the raja's house or palace).[34] Tejchandra and then later his son, Pratapchandra, usually presided over the proceedings, requiring security from or rejecting people considered to be of doubtful reliability. Initially, Tejchandra sold 740 patni taluqs. By 1812, "scarcely ten villages of the Rajah's property" had not been let in patni.[35]

[32] A draft of a regulation defining the rights of certain dependent taluqdars, denominated pattani, prepared by J.H. Harrington, John Fendale, and W.E. Rees, SDA, JP, Civil, Prog. 28 of 8 Oct. 1819, vol. 271.

[33] Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, p. 70.

[34] Raja Pratapchandra to H.T. Prinsep, enclosure to H.T. Prinsep's memorandum of 12 July 1819.

[35] C. Trower, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 5 Aug. 1812, BOR Prog. of 11 Aug. 1812, vol. 507.

In the early 1790s, the Burdwan zamindari had been divided into a mere ninety-two farms. So the 740 original patnidars who paid their rents to the raja represented a significant broadening of the numbers of people who held directly under the zamindar. The patnis varied greatly in size but the average patni contained about a dozen villages. Three factors may have led the raja and his amla to break down the zamindari into small units. First, they seem to have known that the demand for patnis was high and that the larger the number, the greater the premiums they stood to realize. Second, the failure of rents in one small taluq was less likely to hurt the zamindari's payments to government than in a large taluq. Finally, the need to resume unauthorized rent-free, under-rated, and unassessed lands required close, painstaking supervision. Effective local management involved reconstruction of an authentic record of rental obligations, by examining rent receipts where they existed, by consulting the chief raiyats and former naibs and gomashtas, and sometimes by sending a naib to measure each raiyat's holdings. Often, perhaps usually, the raiyats contested the demands and measurements of the new intermediaries.

The wider distribution of superior tenancies suggests a leveling of gentry power in the mofussil. Undoubtedly, there was some leveling, although some of the eastern patnidars under the Burdwan raj were men of substantial wealth who were zamindars in their own right as well as holding patnis under the Burdwan raj. These included Dwarkanath Singh of Singur, the Banerjis of Telinpara, and the Mukherjis of Uttarpara, all in modern Hughli district. Unfortunately, no list of patnidars seems to have survived. Most had high caste names and they included employees and former farmers under the Burdwan raj, as well as ex-government employees, mofussil gentry, and members of the legal profession. Many patnidars and their subordinates who purchased perpetual rent-collecting rights may have managed the same villages as kutkinadars and naibs under the old farming system. There is no evidence to suggest that the patni system ushered in a social revolution in the mofussil although in the first two decades patnis often changed hands in contrast to Tejchandra's original expectation.

With each patni sold, Tejchandra tried to obtain a rental well above what he annually paid to the Company's government. This may be seen in the Bishnupur estates, in what was then called the Jungle Mahals district. In 1806, with his treasury flush from the sale of Burdwan and Hughli patnis, Tejchandra bought pargana Bishnupur, the last unsold section of the Bishnupur zamindari, giving him ownership of over nine-tenths of this ancient estate to the south and west of the traditional Burdwan zamindari. The Burdwan raj was taking advantage of the distress of its neighbors as it bought lands formerly owned by the rajas of Birbhum and Nadia as well. As Ratna Ray wrote, Burdwan's purchase of Bishnupur "provided a striking case of the circulation of landed rights within an older class of magnates, and the supplanting of one traditional landed

magnate by another." The auction sales by no means benefited "new men" alone.[36]

Tejchandra paid government a purchase price of Rs. 15,000 for pargana Bishnupur which had an assessed jama of Rs. 1,28,201. He then divided his purchase into lots and auctioned them, some to temporary farmers and the rest to patnidars.[37] Most of the men who purchased the lots were strangers to the area and continued to live absentee. They paid Tejchandra premiums of Rs. 80,000 and contracted to pay him over Rs. 2.5 lakhs annually in rents so that his income would have been almost double what he owed government if he had been able to collect it.

What Tejchandra had not anticipated was that his patnidars would sell perpetual or patni-type leases in turn. In the pattern followed throughout the Burdwan zamindari, the Bishnupur patnidars subinfeudated and gave permanent leases to *darpatnidars*, and they in turn often leased to *sepatnidars*. At each stage, the superior took a premium in return for the lease. In some cases, the patnidar was raising the capital necessary to pay the raja's premium by charging a purchase price to his subordinate darpatnidar. Often, the patnidar was speculating that by buying ownership rights from the raja, he could increase his profits by resettling the land at higher rents with darpatnidars. But if darpatnidars contracted to pay both premiums and higher rents, they expected to recover their costs by enhancing the demand on the raiyats. The effect was a general ratchet-like increase of village rents. The Magistrate of Bankura estimated that whereas government had collected Rs.1,84,000 from the raiyats in 1805-06, the Burdwan raja, his patnidars, and their darpatnidars aspired to collect almost Rs. 4,00,000 in 1806-07.[38]

Collection of the full zamindari rents depended on the resumption of lands held rent-free under Raja Chaitanya Singh, the former zamindar of Bishnupur, by his family, militia, and religious specialists. Tejchandra attempted to resume those lands, claiming that they were not legally rent-free under Company regulations. At first, Tejchandra used force to try to seize them.[39] This led to "widespread disturbances," including incursions of chuars from the jungles under the leadership of indigent members of the Bishnupur raj famiiy who looted towns in 1807 and 1808. Although at Tejchandra's request, the government banished Madhab Singh, the leader of the Bishnupur family's resistance, to Hughli in 1808, the government was basically unsympathetic to Tejchandra's unilateral efforts to resume lands and raise the Bishnupur rents.[40] It ordered

[36] Ray, *Change*, pp. 121–22.
[37] A. Anderson, Burdwan Asst. Col. at Bankura, to BOR, 12 Nov. 1813, BOR Prog. 17 of 23 Nov. 1813, vol. 523.
[38] William Blunt, Bankura Mag., to BOR, 17 Aug. 1810, BOR Prog. of 28 Aug. 1810, vol. 481.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ray, *Change*, pp. 125–26.

Tejchandra to stop using force and to apply to the courts for help in recovering illegally alienated land. The raja of Burdwan and his patnidars did contest members of the Bishnupur raj family in court. In some suits, the Bishnupur family complained that their lands had been seized illegally; in some cases, the Burdwan zamindar and his patnidars claimed that the Bishnupur raj held rent-free lands illegally. When decisions went against the Burdwan raja and the patnidars, they appealed. The Bishnupur family was so destitute that it did not have the resources to pursue these legal battles and it gradually lost its remaining land. The Burdwan Collector reported in 1820 about the "distressing sight" of the ruined "piles of extensive buildings" and of "the Rajah [Jai Singh] and his family reduced to live in mud cottages on the spot where their palace formerly stood."[41]

As the Bishnupur raj family's resistance faded, Tejchandra struggled to collect from his patnidars.[42] By 1810, all his patnidars in Bishnupur were in arrears and he was having so much difficulty that he pleaded with government to buy the estate back from him. The Board of Revenue was interested in the raja's offer but would not agree to his condition that he be refunded his purchase price with interest.[43] In March 1813, Tejchandra privately sold his Bishnupur estate to Ramesbak Mallik, one of his lawyers in Calcutta. The Assistant Collector in Bishnupur believed that the sale and transfer were "fraudulent and fictitious" and that Tejchandra's purpose in staging a sale was to give the Burdwan raj a pretext to cancel the patnis and to re-sell them on better terms.[44] The Judges in the Jungle Mahals, in contrast to those in the Burdwan courts' jurisdiction, consistently held that when a patni was sold for arrears, the leases of the subordinate taluqs were rendered null and void. This meant that the patni could be re-sold without the encumbrances of darpatnidar leases. From Tejchandra's perspective, this offered the opportunity of obtaining a higher premium, especially if the previous lease-holders had succeeded in resuming rent-free land and in raising rents.

The Bishnupur pattern of subinfeudation also occurred in the rest of the Burdwan zamindari. When Tejchandra introduced patnis in 1800 or 1801, he had not anticipated the development of a secondary market for permanent leases. But entrepreneurial members of the mofussil elite eagerly grasped the opportunity to gain permanent title to their taluqs. In imitation of the raja, they sold subordinate rent-collecting rights to darpatnidars, and they to sepatnidars so that three or more intermediaries stood between the dominant raiyats and the

41 J.E. Elliot, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 26 Aug. 1820, Prog. of 12 Sept. 1820, BOR, vol. 613.
42 Petition of Tejchandra, BOR Prog. 22 of 30 Dec. 1808, vol. 460.
43 BOR to C. Trower, Burdwan Col., 20 July 1810, BOR Prog. 38 of 20 July 1810, vol. 480.
44 A. Anderson, Burdwan Asst. Col. at Bankura, to BOR, 12 Nov. 1813, BOR Prog. 17 of 23 Nov. 1813, vol. 523.

zamindar. Each permanent tenure-holder pocketed the purchase price and raised the rent demand on his subordinates in order to obtain both a profit and reimbursement for his costs of purchase and collection. In effect, each was speculating that he could raise the rents of those below. Many failed to collect their contracted rents and found themselves dispossessed and in some cases imprisoned.

If the sub-tenancy was small enough and if the sub-tenant was resident in his taluq, then he could enhance his profits by managing his taluq personally, without the expense of hiring naibs to manage for him. The Collector of Midnapur reported in 1802, before the introduction of the patni system, that the profits on taluqs averaged 10-12 percent of the jama, that in addition there was an average deduction of 8 percent on the sadr jama for *surinjami* or collection costs, and thus if a taluqdar personally managed his property, he might obtain a profit of 20-25 percent. But two-thirds or more of the auction purchasers were absentee.[45] Probably the potential savings on *surinjami* costs inspired many small darpatnidars and sepatnidars to speculate in permanent tenures.

In Bishnupur and some other parts of the Burdwan zamindari, the turnover of patnidars, darpatnidars, etc., was rapid and repeated as each struggled to recover his purchase costs, as well as show a profit. The Magistrate at Burdwan observed in 1809 that some of the "very minute portions" into which estates were subdivided were transferred several times within a single year.[46] The Magistrate at Bankura also complained about the constant changes and said that patni estates were so divided that there were "almost as many Talookdars as there are Villages in these Pergunnahs".[47] In 1819, Raja Pratapchandra, Tejchandra's successor, seemed to echo British officials when he lamented the extreme subinfeudation that had occurred: "Now when five people expect to derive distinct profits from the same Mahaul ... how distressed and miserable the situation of the Ryyot must be, many of the Mehauls have in consequence become deserted and waste" and the raja's rent collections declined. When the raja sued for the arrest of patnidars under Regulation VII of 1799, the patnidars disappeared.[48]

The patni system was not giving Tejchandra the stability he craved. Until 1808-09, the government permitted Tejchandra to resettle forfeited patnis without a court order but in that year a Judge ruled that a zamindar could not re-sell patnis without first proving arrears in court and obtaining a court

45 T.H. Ernst, Midnapur Col., to Jud. Dept., 12 Feb. 1802, JP, Civil, Prog. 102 of July 1802, vol. 75.
46 W.B. Bayley, Burdwan Ag. Mag., to Jud. Dept., 8 Dec. 1809, JP, Crim., Prog. 1 of 15 Dec. 1809, vol. 219.
47 W. Blunt, Jungle Mahals Mag., to Jud. Dept., 28 Aug. 1809, JP, Crim., Prog. 60 of 8 Sept. 1809, vol. 210.
48 Petition of Pratapchandra, 30 March 1819, JP, Civil, Prog. 30 of 8 Oct. 1819, vol. 271.

order for resale. This delayed the sales well into the following year, complicated the process of finding new patnidars, and made it difficult for Tejchandra to pay his revenue promptly.[49]

In April 1813, Tejchandra retired from active management of his estate, complaining of feeling old and of "constant ill health." Years of enmity with his mother and struggles with the Company, as well as venereal disease, had taken their toll. He transferred ownership of that part of the zamindari he had not given previously to Rani Kamalakumari, his seventh wife, to Pratapchandra, his twenty-two-year-old and only son. Raja Pratapchandra, according to the Burdwan Collector, was "an intelligent active young man and has been in the habit of managing a great part of his father's business for the last two or three years."[50] Pratapchandra managed both his own and stepmother's property. Pratap did not introduce significant innovations into the Burdwan raj administration. But his period of management witnessed a new government effort to iron out anomalies in the patni system and to limit the power of the zamindars and patnidars to dispossess their renters.

Beginning in 1815, the patni system began to drift into crisis. The raja of Burdwan was re-selling several hundred patnis every year;[51] the courts were clogged with suits;[52] British Judges, without clear guidance from the Sadr Diwani Adalat in Calcutta, ruled inconsistently; darpatnidars and sepatnidars violently resisted when new owners tried to take possession of and impose new settlements on their purchased taluqs; the rents demanded from raiyats were raised repeatedly; raiyats were often arrested; affrays were common. A frequent observation in official comments on the patni system was that cultivators were the ultimate sufferers from the efforts of the rural gentry to secure a permanent share of the rents. The Magistrate in Burdwan wrote in 1815 that "a great proportion of Ryotts" had been reduced to a "wretched state ... entirely owing to the Putnee system ... which has occasioned a Constant transfer of Talooks" and the use of "every species of fraud and violence" against the raiyats.[53] In the same year, the Governor General, Lord Moira, specifically mentioned Burdwan when he wrote that "the class of village proprietors appeared to be in a train of annihilation" because of the extortions by zamindars, taluqdars and other members "of the higher

[49] H.T. Prinsep memorandum of 12 July 1819.

[50] C. Trower, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 22 April 1813, BOR Prog. 19 of 27 April 1813, vol. 516.

[51] J.E. Elliot, Burdwan Ag. Col., to BOR, 16 Jan. 1818, BOR Prog. 5 of 20 Jan. 1818, vol. 574.

[52] Burdwan courts decided 18,039 civil suits, mostly concerning rents, from February 1815 to June 1818. H.T. Prinsep's report on execution of civil judgments, 30 Sept. 1820, JP, Civil, Prog. 10 of 23 April 1821, vol. 284.

[53] W.M. Fleming, Burdwan Mag., to Calcutta Court of Circuit, 15 May 1815, JP, Crim., Prog. 13 of 28 June 1815, vol. 349.

class." Like the Magistrate of Burdwan, he called for action to protect the raiyats.[54]

Many years passed before the government took specific action to define and protect the rights of raiyats. Security of government revenue took precedence over concern for the welfare of the cultivating classes. Tenancy legislation was considered likely to jeopardize the state's income. Therefore, the East India Company contented itself with minor measures, such as the appointment of qanungos in 1820 to collect information on the rights of tenants. In the meantime, it tinkered with the patni system in the hope that reform at the intermediate level would reduce the compulsion to screw up the rents at the village level.

The key issue was the status of subordinate leases because when a forfeited patni came up for sale it was difficult to find bidders if prospective bidders believed the patni was encumbered by uneconomical subordinate leases, as it often was. If a patnidar found his patni's income was lower than he anticipated due to uneconomic permanent leases, the major means he had available to raise the rents was to withhold his rents owed to the zamindar, allow his patni to be confiscated, and then re-purchase the patni benami at the zamindar's auction sale in order that he could make a new settlement with his intermediaries. But this means of voiding subordinate leases would only work if the courts ruled that sub-leases fell when the superior patni lease was voided due to arrears. And when the darpatnidars and sepatnidars believed that their leases would be voided and they would be displaced without compensation for their original purchase price and investments in improving their estate's assets, they often began to withhold their rents from the day the zamindar sued their superior patnidar. Therefore, the crucial issue in the patni system was whether subordinate leases voided or not when the patni was sold for arrears.[55]

The district courts did not follow a uniform policy over the question of voiding subordinate leases when a patni lease was canceled and resold on account of arrears. From the outset, as we have seen, the court at Bankura, with jurisdiction over Bishnupur, sided with the raja of Burdwan and his patnidars and allowed them to cancel subordinate, permanent leases. But the courts at Hughli (until 1815) and Burdwan (until 1816 or 1817) had taken the opposite position. The Judges of these latter courts had sided with the darpatnidars. The Judges believed that the raja of Burdwan and his patnidars were conspiring to have the patnidar default so that the raja could bring the patni to sale again for

[54] GG's Rev. Minute of 21 Sept. 1815, Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, 1831–32 (Revenue), *British Parliamentary Papers: Colonies, East India*, vol 9, App. 11.

[55] This and the following discussion of the legal complexities of the patni system is based on H.T. Prinsep's memorandum of 12 July 1819 and its appendices which include letters and testimony of various Bengali zamindars, patnidars, darpatnidars, and professionals, as well as notes on and abstracts of legal cases.

a new premium and so that the patnidars could raise their rents. The raja and his patnidars then shared the profits of these collusive arrangements. The profits derived from canceling the sub-tenures were significant in this period of rising rents and willingness to pay premiums for permanent sub-leases.

Between 1815 and 1817, district Judges in Hughli and Burdwan reversed their predecessors' positions and ruled that when a patni was sold for arrears, the patnidar's contracts with darpatnidars voided, regardless of whether the darpatnidar was in arrears or not. The Judges were influenced by the knowledge that many darpatni contracts were under-valued and that consequently new patnidars and the raja were having serious difficulty in collecting enough to meet their own financial obligations. The Judges' reversal of more than ten years of precedents promised to upset the legal system and agrarian relations as they had operated in recent years. Darpatnidars filed appeals against the decisions of both Judges. The Court of Circuit reversed a decision of the Burdwan Judge, William Bayley, who had given permission to a new patnidar, Haidar Baksh, to cancel a darpatni lease granted by his predecessor. From that reversal and from the shrill comments of various judicial authorities on the practical and legal issues involved, it was evident that Company employees were exasperated by the confusion in law, the frequent re-sales of patnis, and the consequent tension and violence in relations between intermediaries and raiyats. The first Judge of the Calcutta Court of Appeals asserted that the raja of Burdwan had created the patni system so that "he might plunder the undertenants of his Estate with impunity" and without interference by government. He observed that the raja had often brought patnis to sale, realizing a new purchase price each time. "What is there to prevent his selling the greater part of his Estate anew every month, and gulling hundreds of Individuals?" It had not been the government's intention "to abandon the undertenants and Ryots" to the "unfeeling authority" of the superior landholders.[56]

The conflicting judicial opinions seriously disrupted Burdwan zamindari collections as it became clear that the legal issue would not be finally settled until the government passed new regulations or the Sadr Diwani Adalat ruled on the appeals from the lower courts. Raja Pratapchandra complained in September 1817 that when his patnidars heard of the Court of Circuit's decision, they "have to a man withheld their rents." The result was that the raja's mofussil arrears were almost Rs. 9 lakhs for the current year and Rs. 5 lakhs for the previous year. Pratapchandra claimed that he had been forced to borrow Rs. 13 lakhs to pay his revenue and that he now faced "total failure." If government

[56] Minute of J. Wintle, Calcutta Court of Appeals, 2 June 1817, JP, Civil, Prog. 7 of 16 Sept. 1817, vol. 263.

did not help, "I must sink with my family into sudden ruin."[57] To reinforce his claim of urgent distress, he requested that government permit him to give up the Hughli part of his zamindari.[58] That the raja filed suits for Rs. 9.2 lakhs of arrears from patnidars was evidence that he was not exaggerating his difficulty.[59] In 1818-19, when the raja's cash reserves and credit were apparently exhausted, land with a jama of Rs. 9 lakhs was advertised for sale in Burdwan district.[60] In June 1819, he had obtained warrants for the arrest of 160 defaulting patnidars but had succeeded in arresting only one.[61] However, the patnidars did not want the Burdwan raja to lose his lands because they stood to lose their investments. Therefore, the patnidars as a body petitioned government to stay the sale of the raja's lands. The government agreed to their request.[62] The Burdwan zamindari, paying 15 percent of Bengal's revenue, was in deadlock. The patni system was paralyzed by official indecision and the ambiguities in the law.

To clear up the confusion over, and draft a new regulation for, the patni system, the government deputed H. T. Prinsep, the Superintendent and Remembrancer of Legal Affairs, to the Burdwan zamindari. Prinsep spent part of May and June 1819 in Hughli and Burdwan examining documents and interviewing various parties. In July, he submitted a report[63] containing a draft law which was enacted on 3 September as Regulation VIII of 1819.[64] Regulation VIII finally brought order to the patni system and peace among the elites of the Burdwan zamindari.

Regulation VIII of 1819 gave explicit legislative recognition to the patni system for the first time. The major feature of Regulation VIII was to declare that when a patni was sold for arrears to a zamindar, the darpatnis and other dependent, permanent leases would become void. This had the effect of making the forfeited patnis unencumbered and thus a more valuable and desirable purchase for prospective bidders. From the perspective of the raja of Burdwan,

57 Petition of Pratapchandra to SDA, JP, Civil, Prog. 7 of 16 Sept. 1817, vol 263.

58 C. Lushington, Hughli Ag. Col., to BOR, 18 June 1817, BOR Prog. 3 of 24 June 1817, vol. 567.

59 Statement of the balances of patni taluqs of estates of the raja of Burdwan, enclosure 12 to H.T. Prinsep's memorandum of 12 July 1819.

60 Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, App. B.

61 H.T. Prinsep's memorandum of 12 July 1819 and enclosure 9.

62 Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, p. 73.

63 H.T. Prinsep's memorandum of 12 July 1819.

64 According to stories now current in Bengal, one of the Burdwan raj amla drafted Regulation VIII although government records do not substantiate them. One version says "Gourang Munshi, a kinsman of the famous Vishwanath Munshi, who played so prominent a part in the decennial settlement of the Raj, entered the Maharaja's service, and having prepared a draft of regulation, took Kumar Pratap Chand with him to Calcutta, spent immense money in giving balls, &c. to the members of the Government, and through Pratap Chand's influence and countenance, had his draft made law in the Council." S.B. Chaudhuri, "Pattani (*Putnee*) Tenures," p. 353.

it meant that he was likely to be able to recover his full arrears from the sale of forfeited patnis. To assist further the raja of Burdwan and other rent receivers, the sales of forfeited patni-type taluqs would be conducted twice a year so that rent receivers did not have to wait until the following revenue year to recover all their arrears. These changes made rent collection in the patni system decidedly easier.

Government authorities also wanted to protect intermediate rent collectors who had fulfilled the terms of their contracts. In order to afford darpatnidars and other rent *payers* a measure of protection when patni-type leases were voided in a sale for arrears, they were entitled to sue for the value of their tenure from the proceeds of the sale if they could prove they were not in arrears to the defaulting superior holder. This gave the darpatnidars, sepatnidars, etc., a motive to continue to pay in their rents when their superiors fell into arrears, instead of all withholding their rents as they often had done in the past.[65]

From the perspective of the raja of Burdwan, an objectionable innovation was the "new mode of sale." Regulation VIII deprived zamindars of the right to conduct the sales of patnis in arrears. Hereafter, such sales were to be public and to be conducted by the Collector. Patnidars had sought this change because some, at least, believed the raja's sales had not been fair or open. The peshkar of the Hughli court reported that all re-sales of patni taluqs had been "for the exact amount of the balance but there is a further price paid under hand that does not appear in the papers."[66] The Judge at Hughli stated that the raja of Burdwan "seems never" to have held auctions for defaulted patnis but instead to have "disposed of them by private bargain."[67] Thus there seemed good reason to doubt the raja's claim that his sales had always been open and fair. In the future, Regulation VIII restricted what the raja could recover from patni re-sales to the arrears due.

Raja Pratapchandra objected vigorously to the proposed loss of his customary right to conduct the sales of forfeited patnis. What the raja did not acknowledge was that he had broken faith with defaulting patnidars, the men whose character he claimed to have judged, by refusing to credit them with surpluses above their arrears that he collected as premiums when re-selling their forfeited estates. Money value had replaced the ethic of mutual loyalty once patronage gave way to auctions. Pratapchandra's protest was unavailing and after 1819 the government conducted the auctions for forfeited patnis.

65 H.T. Prinsep's memorandum of 12 July 1819.

66 Examination of Gora Chand Mulick, enclosure 4 to ibid.

67 This same Judge had in fact unilaterally ordered *public* sales of forfeited patnis in Hughli well before Regulation VIII of 1819 was passed and he had been returning the surplus proceeds of the sale to the defaulting patnidars. W. Forrester, Hughli Ag. Judge, to Register, SDA, JP, Civil, Prog. 7 of 16 Sept. 1817, vol. 263.

The vigor of Pratapchandra's protest over losing the right to preside over the auction of his patnis was understandable because making the *bandobast* or settlement and choosing his subordinate renters had been at the heart of the traditional zamindar's discretionary power. The raja now had almost no hand in the management of his estate and significantly less patronage to distribute. He did not even have the legal power to summon a defaulting patnidar into his presence. The Burdwan rajas continued into the twentieth century to hold the annual puniya ceremony in which their patnidars paid a symbolic rupee for the privilege of holding land but the puniya was now a ceremonial form without legal meaning. The raja of Burdwan had become effectively an annuitant. As a Judge of the Calcutta Court of Appeals said in 1817, "the Novel Circumstance is exhibited of one of the largest Zemindarries in the country, paying *rent* to Government, without having a right to the actual *property* of one Begah scarcely, in the soil, but merely a title to the Rents."[68] Apart from the legal establishment, most of the Burdwan raj *sheristas* or offices were shut down or reduced and the raja's powers of patronage shrank to a fraction of their former size.

Except for the loss of his ability to conduct patni auctions, Raja Pratapchandra had little to complain of. The raja and most patnidars, as well as government officials, seemed satisfied with the financial working of Regulation VIII of 1819. In 1826, the Collectors of both Burdwan and Hughli (Hughli was separated from Burdwan in 1820 as a separate collectorate) reported that Regulation VIII had ended the insecurity experienced by zamindars and patnidars in collecting their rents. The Burdwan Collector thought this new security had encouraged "the investment of Capital in lands formerly uncultivated" and had thus created a demand for agricultural labor "which must have in great measure ameliorated the condition of the labouring Class." He also saw no need for new legislation to protect cultivating tenants.[69]

What Regulation VIII of 1819 made more secure was the realization of rents by the zamindars and their intermediaries. The intermediaries themselves continued to change often as a market in permanent rights to rents continued to operate.[70] Not only were patnis, darpatnis, etc., often transferred through private sales and auctions for arrears, they were frequently shared in joint tenancy or divided into fractional shares.[71] The raja of Burdwan had originally granted 740 patni taluqs with an average of roughly a dozen villages each; by 1819, the

68 Minute of J. Wintle, Calcutta Court of Appeals, 2 June 1817.

69 J. Armstrong, Burdwan Ag. Col., to BOR, 28 Jan. 1826; R. Udny, Hughli Ag. Col., to BOR, 17 Feb. 1826; and BOR to GG, 20 June 1826, BOR Prog. 46 and 47 of 20 June 1826, vol. 739.

70 W.H. Belli, Hughli, Col., to Jud., Dept., 24 Jan. 1828, and H. Millett, Burdwan Judge, to Jud. Dept., 27 Aug. 1832, TR Prog. 13 and 20 of 29 Jan. 1833, vol. 880.

71 Minute by J.E. Elliot, BOR, 22 May 1827, BOR Prog. 20 of 22 May 1827, vol. 761.

Burdwan zamindari had 1,495 patnis with an average of about six villages each;[72] by 1873, the number of patnis had roughly doubled again.[73] The numbers of darpatnidars and sepatnidars also continued to grow and were more numerous than patnidars. Some intermediaries who had given land to subordinates on perpetual leases continued to manage the collections from the raiyats on part of their land. But in general a substantial proportion of the mofussil gentry received a fixed annual income without having any responsibility for the messy task of collecting from the raiyats, whose rents rose as their own number and the number of annuitants above them multiplied. Few of those intermediaries contributed anything to agricultural production except the credit which their rack-rented tenants were forced to request.

The proximate cause of the patni system was the Burdwan raja's desire to secure his rents by applying to his taluqdars the same permanence of obligation and automatic forfeiture for arrears as the Company had imposed on the zamindars. The ultimate source of the introduction of perpetual leases and their extension down the rent-collecting ladder seems to have been something else. The perpetuity of the leases seemed to promise an escape from the contention and litigation which the Cornwallis system promoted and which were at fundamental odds with the paternalism and discretionary powers of benevolence and coercion of the zamindari order of an idealized earlier age. The receipt of an annual and uncontested income, while the educated recipient pursued his professional occupation or lived in idleness, had a familiar analogue in the bazi zamin or revenue-free land grant. The patni lease was not revenue-free but it offered a trouble-free income from one generation to the next. The goal was common in Bengali and other civilizations. The patni system, then, was an adaptive effort to achieve what was culturally familiar in a new legal order which promoted the maximization of private interest through binding and perpetual contracts. Finally, the patni system represented an effort by Bengali elites to obtain financial security in a colonial society whose economy was increasingly agricultural, whose population was rising, and whose government reserved the highest offices to foreigners. The patni system was the culmination of a process underway among the supra-village elites for many decades, reaching back to the creation of large zamindaris with bureaucratic forms of rental management and the spread of rent farming. Patrimonial, long-term, often hereditary relationships governed by a combination of custom and discretion had given way to contractual and frequently temporary relationships regulated by formal law and the agents of a foreign judiciary.

72 A draft of a regulation prepared by J.H. Harrington, John Fendale, and W.E. Rees.

73 Burdwan district had 2,446 patnis in 1873; Hughli district had 681 patnis; and the Burdwan raja's estates in Bankara district had 341 patnis. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, vol. III, p. 348, and vol. IV, pp. 82 and 257.

17 Conclusion

From the sixteenth through most of the eighteenth centuries, local Hindu kingship cushioned rural Bengal's multi-cellular society from the penetration of the state and the market. Raja-zamindars reigned over societies that united Brahmins, landholding gentry, and ranked peasantry into configurations approximating the mental templates created by normative Hindu expectations of how society should function. Within zamindaris, partially autonomous rajas preserved ritual cycles, the entitlements of dependents with superior bio-moral status, and the unequal distribution of rental and tax obligations.

The imperial, foreign Mughals and British relied on the authority of local kingship in their efforts to expand territorial control, monetization, and accountancy. In permitting themselves to serve the revenue appropriation and commercial purposes of these visitors to Bengal, the zamindars entered a transformative partnership from which there was no satisfying escape. As the state pushed further into what had once been semi-independent sovereignties, the role and size of the service gentry, financiers, and merchants expanded. Patronage and political favor drew enterprising people out of parochial societies into new patterns of cooperation and rivalry over larger and larger distances. By the early eighteenth century, older ethnic and functional boundaries were losing their clarity. The Mughal government was conferring mansabdari rank on the larger zamindars of Bengal, warrior-bureaucrats were trading, western Indian bankers were instrumental in collecting the land revenue, and Bengali merchants were contracting to bring local merchandise to European trading factories.

As the Mughal government in Bengal in the early eighteenth century gained effective autonomy from Delhi, it forged a new, uneasy alliance with large zamindars who displaced the peripatetic mansabdars as the primary agency of district supervision. The enlistment of zamindars as major partners of the state lessened "the discontinuity between the social base and the political superstructure" that had been "a characteristic of Indian polity."[1] This gave a temporary

[1] Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 20.

respite to local, hereditary, Hindu kingship from the long-term trend towards centralization. Through most of the century, fewer than a dozen rajas were responsible for over half the state's revenue demand. Their survival in a shifting political environment, during the contest between competing Mughal, Maratha, and European imperialisms, was remarkable testimony to their hold over local societies and their value to outside powers in quest of Bengal's revenue and trade. The position of the large zamindars, however, was riddled with contradiction and tension. After 1756, the zamindars' desire for autonomy and preservation of their Hindu patrimonial authority was pitted against an insistent nawabi and British drive for higher collections and fuller local control. In the final decades of the century, the inflexible revenue demand and the new state-controlled courts and police reduced the ability of local rajas to indulge their dependents, exercise reciprocity, or focus on the ritual elements of kingship. Local kingship was forced to serve the extractive goals of the colonial state.

Nevertheless, up to the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the zamindari system retained numerous feudal-type social forms that derived from models of Hindu kingship and that resembled European feudalism. The parallels with feudalism were notable, if incomplete. First, political authority within Bengal was fragmented, delegated, and then sub-delegated so that even petty chiefs replicated the forms and rituals of Hindu kingship. Rajas and their intermediaries punished wrong-doing, settled disputes, and allocated shares of revenue obligations to the villages according to local conventions, with minimal state intervention. Murshidabad or Calcutta probably intruded into the consciousness of most villagers only a few times a year. Even the raja of a large zamindari was a remote figure for all but the grihastha (respectable householder) and dominant peasants. The state had not taken control over what it claimed at times to be its own: the right to regulate relations between the zamindar and his peasants. And the zamindar was likely to interfere with village hierarchies only when there was a failure of the rent. Even in these cases, the zamindar usually left the matter to his intermediary.

The second parallel with feudalism was the personalized relations between the links in the landed hierarchy, especially in zamindari ceremonies. Popular ideology did not distinguish clearly between the raja as the state's tax collector and the raja as local partner of the deity and Brahmins and as upholder of dharma. People expected to honor their social superiors as they honored their deities. The terms of a villager's tenure were established or renewed in face-to-face meetings with his superior rent receiver and were governed by a mixture of custom and the superior's discretion far more often than by state regulations or formal contract. As farming out of the rents for a fixed period spread in the eighteenth century, the relation between a raja and his intermediaries was more often defined by a written agreement, but this contractual relationship was

personalized by the ceremonial puniyas in which the intermediaries attended the zamindar in his kachari. This ceremony, repeated at Murshidabad until 1772 and in the villages long afterwards, implied a "gesture of personal submission."[2] And the bonds that were renewed or created were reinforced by the exchange of ceremonial gifts. Thus what today is seen as a public duty – the payment of government taxes – was expressed as a private or personal obligation to one's master. "Shares" to the rights of kingship were sold, credit was extended, "proto-capitalism" spread, but without "an equivalent development of mentalities."[3]

Third, the peasantry, as in feudal society, was highly differentiated. In a village, a small group of dominant peasants, whether or not they personally handled the plough, usually rented to tenants and employed hired labor and loaned money to their clients. The middle peasants typically tilled with their own family labor and owned their own animals. The lesser peasants worked for others as tenants or laborers, were generally in debt, and were occasionally pressed into compulsory labor service. The steep social stratification of village societies was legitimized by the ideology of caste which assigned sharply different degrees of bio-moral worth to different jatis. The ritual ranking of peasant jatis corresponded in general to economic position and reinforced and legitimized the marked inequalities.

The zamindar's sovereignty reached into the village in a number of ways which were not unlike a European feudal lord's. The zamindar granted fief-like property with "an obligation of service"[4] to village servants, most especially to chaukidars or village watchmen. In widely scattered villages he built or endowed temples. The zamindar or his intermediaries appointed local gentry or superior peasants to act as village headmen and stewards or bailiffs who collected rent and executed zamindari orders. Among the orders transmitted was the demand for payments on the occasion of important events in the family of the raja or the villager. When the raja succeeded to the gadi (throne), built a new rajbari, married, went on a pilgrimage, or arranged the marriage of his child, he imposed special fees on his subjects. Similarly, the raja took small fees on the occasion of a villager's marriage, property transfer, or litigation. So even in a decentralized zamindari, the raja confirmed his presence in each village family each time a major event occurred in the family or the raja's household. Long after the Company banned the fees, zamindars continued to collect them and to insist, with some plausibility, that they were paid voluntarily.

Like European feudal lords, zamindars in the eighteenth century liberally conferred allodial rights, resembling freehold property, on Brahmins, relatives,

[2] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, tr. L.A. Manyon (London, 1961), p. 163.
[3] Bayly, "The Origins of Swadeshi," p. 286.
[4] Bloch, *Feudal Society*, p. 167.

and favorites. Tax- and rent-free, these lakhiraj grants were usually hereditable and transferable. By the late eighteenth century, perhaps a fifth of Bengal's cultivated land was alienated with or without service obligation. Frank Perlin has suggested that privately owned, tax-free property "lies at the centre of concepts and institutions comprising an ideology of corporate and egalitarian individualism."[5] The motive in making these grants was to attach elites to the raja and to strengthen corporatism and hierarchy; the long-run effect, ironically, was to make families economically independent of the raja and to stimulate the growth of individualism that accompanied the spread of absolute property rights. One indication of the increasing individualism and freedom from hereditary masters was the circulation of service gentry between Mughal and Company employment, between trade, land management, and government employment, and between one raja's estate and another.

In other, more important ways, the Bengali zamindari system was not feudal. Both the development of the state and of monetization of the economy far exceeded that of pre-1300 Europe. The nawabi and Company governments were bureaucracies with professional judicial, revenue, and military branches. They extracted as taxes a much larger proportion of the gross produce than European feudal states had or than contemporary China did.[6] A large majority of villages paid their rents in money. Villages near rivers produced rice, sugar, edible oils, cotton, and woven silk and cotton goods for a large-scale inter-regional and international trade that operated independently of the zamindari system. These villages thus not only contributed revenue to their zamindars and the state beyond, they also received back profits for the labor of their cultivators, food processors, spinners, and weavers. Underpinning the extensive transfer of goods, rents, and taxes was an elaborate network of credit. Although landholders lent money, the major bankers were socially and economically independent of the zamindars and were often non-Bengalis. A zamindari was by no means a fully self-contained economic entity. Bankers, traders, and state judicial and police institutions penetrated the boundaries of the rajadoms.

In fact, the eighteenth-century zamindars of Bengal, with the exception of certain frontier rajas, owed their position to state appointments as agents of revenue extraction, and not to the need of local societies for protection in an anarchic age or to a weak king in search of feudal levies. The Bengali zamindar was a partner of the state in drawing revenue from the villages and this exploitive role imposed strains on the raja's ability to fulfill the cultural ideal of the beneficent protector. He was a fiscal creation, however much he cultivated the

[5] Frank Perlin, "Concepts of Order and Comparison," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 12, nos. 2 and 3 (Jan.-April 1985), p. 132.

[6] Kumar and Desai (eds.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II, p. 17.

symbolism of the historic righteous raja and however much his subjects looked to him to uphold dharmic order through regulation of caste behavior and promotion of ritual. If the Bengali zamindar had held a large demesne or home farm, his sovereignty might have more closely resembled feudalism on at least that part of his territory. But zamindars usually did not have large home farms, rarely showed interest in or knowledge of agriculture, and instead acted as rentiers in their economic relations with their subjects.

Most observers stress the independence and the small, family scale of eighteenth-century agricultural production units and the relative absence of serfdom or hereditary servility.[7] The dominant peasantry, the jotdars, it might be argued, were economically autonomous and belonged more to their territory or village than to a superior person. In a large zamindari, the jotdars' immediate superiors were the intermediaries, and intermediaries were more often than not temporary contractors. The rotation of ijaradars, kutkinadars, etc., interrupted the chain of dependency and weakened the lines of personal loyalty. The jotdars were not noted for their servility. On the contrary, they often balked at the imposition of countless abwabs and at efforts to measure their land, although some were coopted by intermediaries into assisting with rent collection. The servile villagers were not the jotdars but instead the untouchables, who were perhaps "no better than semi-serfs."[8] And they were subservient to their affluent village neighbors rather than to the zamindar and his intermediaries. It is likely that untouchables were a large percentage of the villagers who migrated frequently.

Therefore, the eighteenth-century zamindari system had evolved under relatively powerful states that aimed at maximizing their revenue through the agency of zamindars. More often than not, the major zamindari estates were created by bureaucratic employees of the imperial state. The zamindari system encompassed feudal features, including fiefs, allods, *banalité*-type payments, personal dependency, fragmented and private legal and political authority, and a subordinate, stratified peasantry. What was generally missing in relations between superiors and their dependents was vassalage and serfdom, and often with these, formal definition, permanence, and fealty. The eighteenth-century zamindari, from the middle peasant on up, was based on land rents rather than service and thus was not basically feudal.

By the late 1790s, the East India Company had significantly reduced the

[7] For example, see Irfan Habib, "Classifying Pre-Colonial India," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 12, nos. 2 and 3 (Jan.-July 1985), p. 47; Burton Stein, "Politics, Peasants and the Deconstruction of Feudalism in Medieval India," ibid., p. 84; and Ram Sharan Sharma, *Indian Feudalism: c. 300–1200* (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 223–24.

[8] Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. I:*c. 1200–c. 1750* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 54.

political sovereignty of the zamindars while putting in place the judicial machinery that would eventually augment the security of their property in their estates. The Company dismantled much of the zamindar's personal authority by making the administration of justice theoretically a state monopoly and by asserting control over the rural police. The creation of Company law courts in the outlying areas of the zamindaris expanded the state's power to regulate relations between zamindars, intermediaries, and jotdars and curtailed the zamindars' power and patronage. The Cornwallis regulations also recognized the territorial holdings of zamindars and their intermediaries as personal property to serve as security for both the government's revenue demand and private debts. By doing so, the Company was making more absolute an individual's right of property in his share of the agricultural surplus.

The immediate effect of converting land into security for payment of the revenue demand was, of course, destabilizing. Unaccustomed to paying their full revenue promptly in years of poor harvests and lacking sufficient coercive powers to realize their rents, between 1793 and 1819 zamindars forfeited land paying an estimated 45 percent of the government's revenue demand.[9] The number of zamindars or persons paying revenue directly to government grew dramatically. This broadening of land ownership opened up the zamindari ranks to many hundreds of high caste entrepreneurs, government servants, and former employees and intermediaries of the rajas. Yet many of these new zamindars had in one sense or another long lived off agricultural rents. The auction sales under the Permanent Settlement redistributed property titles within a narrow spectrum of society rather than induced a social revolution.

The inability of zamindars to collect their rents promptly under the new, unforgiving regulations and the consequent catastrophic loss of zamindari holdings led the government to arm landholders with draconian powers of coercion in the form of the right to detain and distrain the property of defaulting tenants. These new regulations effectively checked the zamindars' loss of land and left peasants with fewer protections against rack-renting. The raja of Burdwan also developed a novel means of protecting his income. He imitated the Company's practice of bringing to auction the holdings of persons in arrears and of offering the auction purchasers a permanent lease (patni) at a fixed rental. This practice spread widely through western and central Bengal and persuaded the government to give it legal recognition in 1819. The patni regulation of 1819 enabled zamindars to transfer the responsibility for rent collection to patnidars and to rely on government courts to coerce payments from defaulters. The government had not only shifted the object of coercion outside the human body to property,

[9] The percentage has been adjusted for benami repurchases. Islam, *Permanent Settlement*, p. 157.

it had also converted the state into the principal agent of coercion above the village.

By allowing superior rent receivers to distrain the property of jotdars in arrears and by committing the courts and police to the side of rent extraction, the government significantly if temporarily weakened the position of jotdars. The jotdars' superiors could no longer afford the traditional levels of indulgence during poor harvests. The peons acting under court orders requested by zamindars and their intermediaries forced jotdars to pay, surrender property, or engage in prolonged, debilitating legal proceedings. The new patnidars had paid premiums for their leases and therefore had investments to recoup. Many patnidars found that successful rental management required strict accounting, systematic measurement of their villages, and aggressive collection. Jotdars in turn pressed their sub-tenants. Village-level rents probably doubled in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, rising faster than agricultural prices, as patnis became a speculative investment and as patnidars subinfeudated by creating permanent leases for their subordinate gentry sub-rentiers.

Demands for the inflexible government assessments, for the judicially enforced rents, and for the recovery of premiums paid for the patni-style leases rippled down through the rural hierarchy, causing stress for individuals at all levels. Once opulent rajas' families retreated into crumbling palaces, sullenness, and religious mysticism. Patnidars who had dreamed of setting up independently as petty rajas on the rents once paid to their former zamindars found their hopes shattered by jotdar combativeness, administrative inexperience, flood damage, or a failure of ruthless nerve. Many patnidars attended auctions a second time, on this occasion to watch hopelessly as their holdings passed to new owners. Yet probably few former zamindars and patnidars experienced real destitution. Few were without loyal family retainers to preserve them from manual labor; few were without some revenue-free land from which to collect their rents. Jotdars and other peasants, also, had their experience as cultivators to sell. Even the landless, degraded castes on the margins of village society had labor to offer. Thousands, though, turned to dakaiti, for which hundreds paid with sentences of death or transportion for life.[10]

Economic security lay ahead for many of those numerous landholders who survived the shake-out period between 1790 and 1820. With a judicial system that stood squarely behind people of property, efficient managers profited from the rise in population, rents, and agricultural prices. The stability of the government's land revenue demand in an age of inflation was crucial here. However, over the long term that stability may have helped stunt Bengal's economic development. It may have drawn capital and entrepreneurial energies into rental capitalism, into a mode of investment that contributed little to the diversification

[10] McLane, "Bengali Bandits," pp. 26–47.

of economic activity and that pyramided one rent collector on top of another, all living off the labor of a many layered peasantry. Bengal's peasants supported an extraordinarily top-heavy class of high caste rent-receivers and were left with few incentives for innovation. The Company's embalming of the zamindari hierarchy, with its dependence on rental income, dampened the search for technological innovations and perpetuated a "social ideology which enveloped the totality of manual work, ... contaminating hired and even independent labour with the stigma of debasement."[11] Private property was more secure and individualistic and the market for rent collecting rights was more capitalistic. But rental capitalism had been superimposed on a labor system largely insulated from market incentives and entrepreneurial possibility by layers of intermediate annuitants, many of whom were unemployed or underemployed as well as poor.

All in all, the early nineteenth-century economy of Bengal appeared to be no more buoyant than a century earlier, despite its growing exports. Europeans brought neither manufactured goods, capital, nor agricultural innovations to India in significant degree. Rather, they used tax and monopoly revenues to purchase the Company's "investment" and pay for the costly military establishment. In the process, they solidified the impediments to peasant and commercial enterprise while channeling elite aspirations into the dead-end of rent maximization.[12] As Peter Marshall concluded about the first six decades of colonial rule, "both in its manufacturing and its agriculture, eastern India, often to the exasperation of its conquerors, remained a land of very small producers whose way of life had changed very little."[13]

The Burdwan raj, as we have seen, emerged from the period of heavy auction sales with its estate largely intact. The Burdwan zamindari's rent collections stabilized after the patni system was legalized in 1819. Regulation VIII of 1819 constituted a grand compromise between government and the zamindars. In effect, the government agreed to execute the zamindars' coercive work for them, leaving the zamindars as annuitants. In the Burdwan zamindari, the government and the professional staff of managers and lawyers cooperated to ensure that both the Company and the raj family obtained their respective shares of the peasants' production. With over 4,000 square miles, the zamindari remained the largest and most profitable in Bengal. It continued to pay government over

[11] This is Perry Anderson's comment on "the structural constraint of slavery on technology" in the classical world in *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1974), p. 27.

[12] Kumar and Desai (eds.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II, pp. 15–20, 86, 144ff, 165–67, 287, 320, and 814–15 Also Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.2, pp. 113–15, 135, and 162–63.

[13] Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.2, p. 172.

Rs. 30 lakhs while its own rental collection exceeded Rs. 40 lakhs. Net rental profits were reduced to Rs. 6-7 lakhs by management and legal costs,[14] leaving the zamindari with an ample income to pay for the raj family's living expenses, the construction of temples, roads, and palaces, and charitable gifts to such institutions as schools in Burdwan and Midnapur and a fever hospital in Calcutta.[15] The zamindari occasionally purchased new estates, including Calcutta property, and invested in government bonds. With unparalleled resources, the raj was able to attract expert legal, financial, and managerial talent to its service. "The service of a powerful Rajah," wrote a British Magistrate, "is considered by the people of this country in as honorable a light as the service of the Government."[16] Occasionally, Burdwan rajas hired Europeans as zamindari managers. But the nineteenth-century managers who contributed most to the stability of the Burdwan raj were Punjabis: Pran Kapur in the first half of the century and Lala Ban Behari Kapur in the second half. Each not only gave strong administrative leadership and cooperated with the colonial government, each also arranged for the raj family to adopt one of his relatives to succeed as maharaja following a failure of biological succession.

Rent collection in the Burdwan zamindari became highly efficient after the patni act of 1819. Since almost all of the rent-paying land was leased out to patnidars, rent collecting involved meticulous accounting of the patnidars' obligations and payments, followed by legal action to recover arrears. The zamindari's legal department was the heart of the Burdwan raj's operations through the nineteenth century. *Mukhtars* (legal agents) were stationed throughout each of the seventeen estates that made up the zamindari and when a patnidar fell behind in his rents, the mukhtars routinely filed suits. Then, in contrast to the pre-1819 system, the government brought forfeited patnis to sale. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, patnis were forfeited, divided, subinfeudated, and reauctioned frequently. At the start of the century, Burdwan had fewer than 1,000 patnis; by 1885 there were 2,571 patnis.[17] By the end of the century, the Burdwan rents were paid with a high degree of regularity. From 1885 to 1902, the Burdwan raj filed an average of 1,661.7 suits annually for amounts that represented a mere 1.44 percent of the rents due.[18]

Members of the raj family participated in the estate's management as age and inclination allowed but they were essentially irrelevant to the detailed work of

[14] Akinobu Kawai, *'Landlords' and Imperial Rule: Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c.1885–1940* (Tokyo, 1986), pp. 92 and 101.

[15] Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, *Sambad Patra Shekaler Katha* (2 vols., Calcutta, 1933), vol. II, pp. 59 and 238.

[16] E.A. Samuells, Hughli Mag., to T.C. Smith, Supt. of Police, 20 Sept. 1838, JP, Crim., Prog. 44 of 23 Oct 1838, vol. 654.

[17] Kawai, *'Landlords'*, p. 92.

[18] Computed from ibid., p. 103.

revenue extraction. Their more important function was to embody those residual symbolic functions of Hindu kingship that villagers expected of rajas. The Burdwan rajas celebrated religious festivals and their own life-cycle ceremonies with appropriate lavishness. They tended their numerous religious endowments in Burdwan, Kalna, and Darjeeling, where they built palatial residences, and at Brindaban, Benaras, and Puri also. They maintained "32 principal temples and shrines, besides a very large number of minor ones scattered in different parts of the estate." They also built and improved *ghats* (steps descending) for ritual bathing on the banks of tanks and the Bhagirathi river.[19] The numerous revenue-free debottar lands, devoted in theory to the worship of the gods, produced 9.2 percent of the raj's income, and the wages of the debottar department were 16 percent of the estate's expenditure on non-domestic wages in the mid-1880s.[20]

The British interest was in ensuring that the revenues flowed steadily to government. Probably few officials had illusions that British rule was popular or had deep roots in rural consciousness. They depended on the culturally familiar authority of the zamindars, their reluctant partners in financial extraction. Officials were determined to preserve the useful authority of the zamindars, to save them from themselves when necessary. When debts, family feuds, or the minority of a zamindar threatened to disrupt the collections or continuity of ownership, from the 1790s the Court of Wards stood ready to assume control of an estate's management. The Court of Wards ran the Burdwan zamindari in 1838-40 during Raja Mahtabchandra's minority and again in 1885-1902, between Mahtab's death and Bijaychandra's coming of age.[21] The government wanted to keep intact this profitable estate that paid over 15 percent of the province's land revenue. Each time the Company temporarily took over the estate's management from "a disqualified proprietor," it checked the raj family's expenditures and then returned the estate with major debts discharged.

Not only did the government manage the estate occasionally and persuade the family to accept European tutors and estate managers now and again, it also extended its paternalism to protect the family's reputation from the actions of its more wayward members and to enforce Hindu behavioral norms. In the eighteenth century, the Company had acted to curb the behavior of Rani Bishnukumari and Raja Tejchandra. It acted similarly in a celebrated 1838 case involving Rani Basantakumari, Tej's twenty-four-year-old widow. Basanta wanted to travel to Calcutta from Burdwan to pursue her legal cases for the recovery of property valued at Rs. 12 lakhs, including three Calcutta bazars,

19 Ibid., p. 37.
20 Ibid., pp. 92 and 99.
21 Mahtab died in 1879. His widow adopted her half-brother in 1887 and renamed him Bijaychandra Mahtab. Ibid., p. 33.

which Tej had registered in her name. Blocked by Pran Kapur (her father and the zamindari manager) and Rani Kamalakumari (her aunt), Basanta escaped at night over a roof in the company of her vakil, Dakhinaranjan Mukherji. According to rumours, the rani was romantically involved with Dakhinaranjan[22] and her escape was treated as an elopement by Company authorities. Dakhinaranjan was arrested, fined Rs. 200 for abduction, and barred from representing the rani.[23] The rani was forcibly returned to her father and aunt, Rani Kamalakumari, who confined her to a "miserable hovel"[24] and prohibited her from seeing visitors except in the company of Kamala's female servants. A Session Judge permitted Kamala to appoint seventeen armed guards "to take care of the Caste and honour" of Basanta.[25]

Successions were also a problem for the Burdwan raj family, as they were for other zamindars in Bengal. The luxurious environment in which zamindari children were raised was rarely good preparation for assumption of control over vast estates with complicated fiscal machinery. The efforts of tutors to teach discipline and useful literary skills were all too often undermined by zamindari heirs' exposure to indulgent parents and sycophantic servants and by the anticipation of immense inherited authority and privilege. Members of zamindari families frequently failed to provide a model for Hindu ideals of abstemiousness, self-denial, and mental discipline. This was certainly true of some members of the Burdwan raj family. Rajas Tejchandra and Pratapchandra passed through periods of dissoluteness. Few people would have compared the widowed ranis, Bishnukumari and Basantakumari, to Sita. The controversies and family feuds that swirled around the Burdwan rajas and ranis must have made the rajbari an unsettled place to raise children and probably tended to corrode ambition and self-control.

Yet the Burdwan raj had few children to raise. The family suffered from what twentieth-century Bengalis have referred to as a peculiar "curse," a repeated difficulty in producing male heirs despite multiple wives. Raja Chitrasen (1740-44) left no son and was succeeded by his first cousin, Tilakchandra. Raja Tilakchandra (1744-70) finally had a son, Tejchandra, near the end of his life. Raja Tejchandra (1770-1832) eventually married eight wives but only his fifth wife, Nanki, gave birth to a son who survived.[26] That son, Pratapchandra, had

22 Before Dakhinaranjan fell in love with Rani Basanta, his wife, the daughter of Harchandra Tagore of the senior branch of the Tagore family, had been stricken with a mental disorder.

23 T. Wyatt, E. Burdwan Session Judge, to J.F. Hawkins, Register, Nizamat Adalat, n.d., JP, Civil, Prog. 45 of 16 Jan. 1840, vol. 373.

24 G.N. Cheek, Burdwan Asst. Surgeon, to H.E. Metcalf, Burdwan Mag., 1 Aug. 1839, JP, Civil, Prog. 24 of 16 Jan. 1840, vol. 373.

25 Rani Kamalakumari to Deputy Gov. of Bengal, 20 April 1839, JP, Crim., Prog. 62 of 30 April 1839, vol. 622.

26 Tej's sixth wife, Ujjalkumari, gave birth to three still-born children.

no children and apparently died before his father. To ensure an orderly succession, Raja Tejchandra adopted his seventh wife's nephew. The adopted son was renamed Mahtabchandra and served as zamindar of Burdwan from 1840 to 1879. He also died without a male heir and his successor, Bijaychandra, was adopted posthumously. In a century and a half, the Burdwan rajas had had two legitimate male children who reached adulthood: Tej and Pratap.[27]

The politics of zamindari adoption were a serious matter because so much power was concentrated in the person of a raja and because it was likely that the family of an adopted minor heir would displace the influence of relatives of the deceased raja. The adoption of an heir inevitably elevated the heir's close relatives to new levels of authority. Therefore, while a raja was childless, the raja's chief relatives and officers waited anxiously for the birth of a son or for the raja's or his widow's decision on an adoption.

When Pratapchandra's death was announced in 1821, Raja Tejchandra was again heirless. Tej came out of retirement and resumed his role as zamindar. By this time, Tej's Khatri diwan, Pran Kapur, and Pran's sister, Rani Kamalakumari, who was Tej's seventh and eldest living wife, were firmly in control of the estate's affairs. Pran and Kamala had first come to Burdwan from Lahore with their father, a poor Punjabi who allegedly was on a pilgrimage to Puri. Tej had first seen the beautiful Kamala as a young girl while she was playing in a lane in Burdwan. As rajas sometimes did upon spying a female of unusual beauty, he inquired about who she was. Eventually Tej married her. By 1819, Tej elevated Kamala's brother, Pran, as the chief manager of the zamindari. Pran helped persuade the Company to legalize the patni system.[28]

Pran Kapur gave the Burdwan zamindari the focused ambition and energy that hereditary rajas often failed to provide. A British attorney of the Calcutta High Court claimed in 1838 that the Magistrate of Burdwan had told him that he believed Pran paid monthly stipends to "all the principal native officials in the various Courts there" and had them under his influence.[29] In 1826, Pran persuaded the ailing Tej to adopt his son. One source later said that during Tej's 1826 illness, Pran posted armed guards at every door and passage around Tej's apartment, prohibited all British and Indians from seeing him, and used

27 An employee of the Burdwan raj, the keeper of the Kalna *samadhi-bari* (tomb-house) where the bones and ruling emblems of the Burdwan rajas are kept, stated that, according to a version of the *Mahabharata* written for the Burdwan raj, Tej was born supernaturally. By this story, Tej had been Arjuna in a prior life. Krishna wanted Arjuna to rule over a kingdom so he placed Arjuna/Tej as an infant under a bush in the Burdwan zamindari. Dependents of heirless Raja Tilakchandra discovered honey dripping from a bee-hive into the mouth of the baby Tej, recognized this as a divine intervention, and brought him to the palace where he was raised as Tilak's son. Interview with Khokaram, at Kalna, 9 Nov. 1965.

28 Sanjibchandra Chatterji, *Jal Pratapchand* (Calcutta, 1883), p. 7.

29 Note by William Nelson Hedger, 19 May 1838, JP, Crim., Prog. 35 of 29 May 1838, vol. 649.

"promises and threats" to effect the adoption.[30] Company officials probably were relieved by the adoption of a son of such an astute man: they feared confusion if the estate fell to Tej's female relatives.[31] In 1827, Pran also induced Tej to take his twelve-year-old daughter, Basanta, as his eighth wife. This virtually assured Pran's continued dominance because now Tej's two surviving ranis were Pran's sister and daughter, respectively, while his son stood to inherit the zamindari in the event that Basanta failed to produce a son. When Tej died in 1832, Pran's control seemed total.

In 1834, though, a sannyasi claiming to be Raja Pratapchandra arrived in Bengal, saying that he had not died and that he had returned to claim the estate of his dead father, Tejchandra. This curious development led over the next several years to considerable excitement and to one of the most celebrated episodes in the history of the zamindars of Bengal. The story is significant because of the willingness of so many people to believe that the man whom the British referred to as "the pretender" was the real Pratap,[32] because of the anti-colonial feelings the man aroused, and because of the decisive role the Company's government played in preventing the raj family's tumultuous politics from disrupting the estate's affairs. The story of the *Jal* (fake) Pratap is a fitting epilogue to a study of the Burdwan zamindari in the eighteenth century. With the deaths of Pratapchandra and Tejchandra, the natural descendants of the founder Abu Rai ceased to control the Burdwan raj, soon after the raj had lost control of its villages.

Pratap had been born in 1792 to Rani Nanki, Tej's fifth wife, who died when he was six months old. As a young man, he was athletic, learning to swim, ride, and wrestle. He gained a certain fame or notoriety by reportedly beating a British Magistrate in a physical confrontation after the latter's dog obstructed his carriage.[33] Pratap had a reputation for being headstrong. He unsuccessfully resisted the ascendancy of Diwan Pran Kapur and Pran's sister, Rani Kamalakumari, in the raj's affairs. Pratap insisted that Tej write a will that would declare Pratap the lone heir to the zamindari in order to exclude Pran and his own stepmother.[34] He spent time in Calcutta where he associated with non-official Englishmen and Hindu reformers. He was said to have befriended Dwarkanath Tagore and to have joined him and Rammohan Roy (the son of his

30 W.M. Elliott, Bankura Mag., to E.M. Gordon, Com. of Circuit, Chinsura, 6 Feb. 1836, JP, Crim., Prog. 28 of 16 Feb. 1836, vol. 620.

31 J.E. Elliot, Burdwan Col., to BOR, 6 Jan. 1821, BOR Prog. 2 of 12 Jan. 1821, vol. 617.

32 The appearance of "pretenders" was far from rare in India. For example, in 1610, a man appeared claiming to be Amir Khusrau and in 1662–64, in Gujarat, Kolis supported a man calling himself Dara Shikoh. Pearson, "Shivaji and the Decline of the Mughal Empire," pp. 226 and 234.

33 Chatterji, *Jal Pratapchand*, p. 15.

34 Mukhopadhyay, *Bardhamaner*, p. 128.

grandmother's lover) in a predecessor (perhaps the Atmiya Sabha) to the Brahmo Samaj.[35] He also developed an alcohol habit. When Tejchandra became worried about his son's dissolute ways, he arranged for Pratap to meet a respected guru whom he thought might straighten out his life. Shortly before his illness in 1820, Pratap seemed to undergo a personality change. He disappeared, was found in Rajmahal after a long search, and was returned to Burdwan. There he fell severely ill, was taken to Kalna, and according to many witnesses, died on 3 January 1821. Within hours, thousands of people gathered on the river bank and watched by torch light as a purohit presided over the cremation. Several days later, a rumor began to circulate that Pratap had not really died but had left the Burdwan zamindari.[36]

Pratap's two childless widows filed suits against Tejchandra in five different courts to obtain property they claimed belonged to them. However, with Pratap gone and Tej aged, Pran and his sister, Rani Kamalakumari, now enjoyed almost unfettered control of the zamindari. In 1826, Tej adopted Pran's son, renamed Mahtabchandra, to be his heir in the event that neither of his two surviving ranis bore him a son.

When the ascetic claiming to be Pratap arrived in Bengal in late 1834, almost fourteen years after his reported death, to claim the Burdwan zamindari as his rightful inheritance, he said he had faked his illness and death. His explanation was that "having previously led a very dissolute life and committed offences denounced by the Hindoo Shastras," he had been persuaded by the family pandits "to expiate" his sins by making a fourteen year pilgrimage. He said that he had swum from the river bank and escaped to northern India, where he lived as a faqir, mostly in Lahore and Kashmir.[37] The chief violation of the Shastras to which he referred is commonly said to be having sexual relations with his stepmother.[38]

If people in the Burdwan zamindari believed this ascetic's story, was it likely that many prominent people, people whose testimony might have carried weight in the courts, would come forward to support his claims? Probably not. An orderly succession had occurred. The blood-line of Abu Rai, Kirtichandra, and Tejchandra had been replaced by Pran Kapur's. Tej's heir, the adopted

[35] E.H. Samuells, Hughli Mag., to T.C. Smith, Supt. of Police, 20 Sept. 1838, JP, Crim., Prog. 44 of 23 Oct. 1838, vol. 654.

[36] Mukhopadhyay, *Bardhamaner*, pp. 129–32.

[37] Pratapchandra's memorial to Lord Auckland, Gov. of Bengal, 25 April 1836, JP, Crim., Prog. 29 of 17 May 1836, vol. 623.

[38] It should be noted that Jal Pratap might have had a dual motive for trying to discredit Kamala. Charges of grave sexual misconduct might simultaneously explain his faked death and disappearance and turn opinion against her and Pran Kapur. In court, he referred to his own "grave sin" and claimed that Kamala twice attempted to poison him. Chatterji, *Jal Pratapchand*, pp. 93–94.

Mahtabchandra, was not popular[39] but he had been accepted by virtually everybody, including the Company's government. Pran had such power that he could, at the very least, make life uncomfortable for raj dependents who testified on behalf of the unlikely story or identity of the ascetic. The original Pratap had not been a steady or sober individual; this man was constantly or often inebriated.[40] Moreover, when the issue of his identity came to trial in 1838, he could name only two persons who were party to his pretended illness and escape.

The ascetic entered Bengal in 1834 in the company of another "peculiarly Holy" faqir. The two men began to move about quietly in search of supporters, staying for the most part outside of the Burdwan district, where Pran Kapur's power was well established and where Jal Pratap might have been in danger of assassination. Potential supporters existed among families whose lands or offices had been resumed by or forfeited to government and Pran and his amla. Possibly others responded to Jal Pratap's ascetic guise. Jal Pratap wrote letters to many petty rajas, mostly in Manbhum and Bankura districts to the west and south of Burdwan. Among those who responded favorably were the poverty-stricken rajas of Pachet and Bishnupur. The Magistrate of Bankura reported that Pratap had promised to restore pargana Bishnupur to the Bishnupur raj family whose zamindari had been swallowed up by Burdwan in the auction sales, to cancel arrears owed by other landowners, and to confer other benefits. He further said that Pratap had indicated Ranjit Singh's army might come from the Punjab to restore him to the Burdwan gadi and that Pratap would raise a lakh of men "to fight the English." The Magistrate believed that "the lower classes in these parts have been most thoroughly deceived by this man by reason of the countenance he has received from the respectable (so-called) families" of Bankura and Manbhum districts and "would to a man have risen" if he were not confined.[41]

On January 13, 1836, the Magistrate of Bankura found his opportunity to arrest Jal Pratap. After he and 4-500 armed men marched through the Bankura town bazar with drawn swords, the Magistrate and 100 sepoys arrested Jal Pratap and 158 persons in a night-time raid on his camp and seized ninety-four swords, a musket, a pistol, and several matchlocks.[42] In August, a Company court convicted Jal Pratap of "the crime of assembling a tumultuous body of armed men and setting at defiance the Constituted Authorities." He was

[39] T.C. Smith, Supt. of Police, to F.J. Halliday, Sec., Govt. of India, 11 May 1838, JP, Crim., Prog. 35 of 15 May 1838, vol. 649.

[40] I.B. Ogilvy, Burdwan Mag., to T.C. Smith, Supt. of Police, 26 April 1838, JP, Crim., Prog. 30 of 8 May 1838, vol. 649; also, T.C. Smith to F.J. Halliday, 12 June 1838, JP, Crim., Prog. 16 of 12 June 1838, vol. 650.

[41] W.M. Elliott to E.M. Gordon, 6 Feb. 1836.

[42] W.M. Elliott, Bankura Mag., to E.M. Gordon, Com. of Circuit, Chinsura, 14 Jan. 1836, JP, Crim., Prog. 93 of 2 Feb. 1836, vol. 620.

sentenced to six months in prision and was required to post two security bonds of Rs. 20,000 each for his good behavior for the year following his prison term.[43] Only after the expiry of that eighteen-month period did he resume his efforts to arouse popular support for his claims, in the face of Pran Kapur's and the government's hostility.

In early April 1838, the man styling himself Raja Pratap started up the Bhagirathi river from Calcutta in a flotilla of forty-eight boats, with some 500 followers. His object apparently was to move slowly towards Kalna where he would land, attract popular support, and then proceed to Burdwan town if he could be guaranteed protection against attack by Pran Kapur's men. He reached Kalna in mid-April and remained offshore, except for one march through the town, until 2 May in obedience to the Magistrate's orders forbidding him to land with those several hundred followers who were armed with swords and lathis. Crowds of up to 8,000 gathered, either in support or out of curiosity. The ascetic's presence created "great excitement" and local authorities, who had learned of his letter to various landholders, anticipated bloodshed.[44] Finally, on 2 May, the Magistrate of Burdwan and the police moved to arrest the ascetic, opened fire, killed one man and wounded three others, and arrested the *soi-disant* raja and 322 followers. The Superintendent of Police's justification was that Jal Pratap's actions "in the presence of thousands of people who believe in his identity and in the face of the Followers of the Rajah of Burdwan who were residing in" Kalna were intended "to induce a breach of the Peace."[45]

The ascetic was tried and convicted for "fraudulent personation" in the winter of 1838-39. The bulk of the witnesses who testified that he was not Pratap were relatives and employees of Pran Kapur. But the most damaging witness was the entrepreneur-zamindar Dwarkanath Tagore. Dwarkanath had not only been a friend of the original Pratap, he had also been an enemy of Pran's. So great had been Dwarkanath's hostility to Pran that when the ascetic first appeared claiming to be Pratap, many people supposed he was being sponsored by Dwarkanath in order to ruin Pran.[46] Somehow Dwarkanath was persuaded to reverse his early opinion and to testify against Pratap. Dwarkanath's motives may have been tied to his extensive business interests. As one of Bengal's largest zamindars and entrepreneurs, he depended heavily on the good will of government officials. Dwarkanath may also have realized it would be unwise to further antagonize Pran Babu. Between the entry of Jal Pratap into Bengal in 1834 and his first trial in 1836, Dwarkanath decided he wanted to lease a valuable piece of property from the Burdwan raj: the Raniganj coal mine, "the oldest, largest, and

43 T.C. Smith to F.J. Halliday, 12 June 1838.
44 I.B. Ogilvy to T.C. Smith, 26 April 1838.
45 T.C. Smith to F.J. Halliday, 12 June 1838.
46 E.A. Samuells to T.C. Smith, 20 Sept. 1838.

richest" in India. Dwarkanath bought it in July 1836, in "the most important single transaction of Dwarkanath's business career."[47] When Raja Mahtabchandra softened the terms of the lease renewal for Raniganj and two other villages in 1842, it may have been in gratitude for Dwarkanath's role in refuting Jal Pratap's claims and thus helping Mahtab retain his title.[48] At the end of Pratap's 1838-39 trial, his inability to find creditable witnesses to his identity was fatal to his hopes, as were the witnesses who testified that they had seen Pratap's body burned in 1821.

This bizarre episode was finished. The ascetic had exhausted his possibilities even though on the eve of his trial, according to the Magistrate of Hughli, "there are still a large body of persons who remain firmly persuaded that the prisoner is the Raja of Burdwan and who will continue in that belief so long as he remains in this country."[49] Is it possible that Pratap, confounded by Pran Kapur, confused by alcohol and a sexual encounter with his stepmother, and guided by religious advisers, actually did stage his own death and then returned, only to find that most of the people who knew him were afraid or unwilling to identify him? It may be that that is what happened. By this time, though, it mattered little who occupied the gadi. The zamindari bureaucracy, supported by the British judicial system, would gather the revenue while the raja would carry out his familiar role as enabler of ritual, embodying the beneficent but generally powerless and sometimes dissolute faces of authority. The Jal Pratap episode suggested that there was no shortage of people who welcomed the notion that "the English reign is over"[50] but there were few people of influence whose sentiments were so unambivalent that they would risk much to end Company rule.

[47] Blair B. Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley, CA, 1976), pp. 94–95.
[48] Ibid., pp. 108–09.
[49] E.A. Samuells to T.C. Smith, 20 Sept. 1838.
[50] W.M. Elliott to E.M. Gordon, 6 Feb. 1836.

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